

Introduction

Many people find it daunting to read the Bible for themselves, simply because it is unfamiliar. This book is therefore intended as an aid for anyone feeling unfamiliar with the Bible.

Mark's Gospel is a good place to start reading the Bible because it is the shortest of the four Gospels, which recount Jesus' life and teaching. Mark concisely and clearly presents us with the Jesus of history – what he said and did.

This book is not intended as a stand-alone book. Rather, it will be of greatest help if you begin each session by reading the relevant section of Mark's gospel and then use the notes to help you think more about what Mark has written.

While this book is intended to help you read the Bible and discover more about Jesus, the comments are not vital for your understanding. If you wish to read the Bible text alone, I'd encourage you to do so. You could read Mark's Gospel straight through in about an hour and a half. Alternatively, you could use the sub-divisions I've chosen to read a little at a time over the course of a month.

However you read Mark's Gospel, I pray that you will discover that the Bible is not inaccessible at all! Rather, I pray that you will enjoy discovering new things about Jesus – who he is, why he came and what it means to follow him.

Who was Mark?

Mark wrote his Gospel approximately thirty years after Jesus died. He was a friend of Peter, who was a close friend of Jesus and a source of much of the eye-witness material which Mark recounts. Mark's Gospel is one of three other accounts of Jesus life, death and resurrection in the Bible, with the others written by Matthew, Luke and John.

The gospel accounts may include some terms that are new to you, but these are explained in a glossary at the back of the book.

How can I find my way around Mark's Gospel?

Mark's Gospel was originally written as one document. However, for ease of reference, it was later divided into sixteen chapters (often printed as a large number in our texts) and each of those chapters was divided into verses. Sections of the Gospel are referenced by the chapter and verse numbers. For example, Mark 2:3–6 refers to a section of text from Mark chapter 2, beginning at verse 3 and ending with verse 6. Individual verse numbers within a particular chapter are indicated by the abbreviations 'v.' or 'vv.' (for example, v. 1 or vv. 14–16).

While chapter and verse numbers were added afterwards by Bible editors, they can be a useful way of referencing and remembering key sentences within the text. At the beginning of each session of this book, there is one verse from the relevant section of the gospel. You may find it helpful to try remembering this during the day as you reflect on what you are reading.

A note on prayer

We can pray to God about many things – our needs, the needs of others, things for which we are thankful and other things for which we are sorry. We can also pray using either our own words or pre-written prayers. The prayers in this book are designed to help you pray about what you have read in the corresponding passage from Mark's Gospel.

God reveals himself as three persons in one, for example at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9–11). We can call God our Father and pray directly to him because Jesus has made this relationship possible. However, it is often appropriate to pray directly to Jesus or to the Holy Spirit. All such prayers are to the same 'three-in-one' God. Thus Jesus instructed his followers to pray:

- to God the Father. (The most well-known example of this is the Lord's Prayer, which begins, 'Our Father in heaven'.)¹
- in the name of Jesus. (That is why we often end such prayers by saying, 'in Jesus' name'.)
- through the power of the Holy Spirit.

1 See Matthew 6:9 and also Luke 11:2.

He's here!

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God ...

Spoiler alert! Mark answers the question 'Who is Jesus?' in his opening sentence!

Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God (v. 1). The name Messiah means a rescuing King for God's people, and was promised long ago in the Old Testament by prophets such as Isaiah.

In this passage we also meet John the Baptist, who calls people to turn away from their sin and goes about in the wilderness baptising people. All humans face the problem of their sin – ignoring God and his commands. Baptism is a ceremony of washing with water to symbolise the washing away of sin that is possible for all who confess their sin. John is the messenger about whom Isaiah prophesied and who is to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus (v. 3).

The Lord is described by John as one more powerful than he – John isn't worthy to untie his sandals (v. 7)! Finally, the Lord is coming!

How should people get ready for his arrival? Not by laying out a red carpet. Instead, John calls for an inner heart preparation – repentance. That is, all people are urged to be sorry for and turn away from their old sinful way of life, and instead to turn towards God's way.

Jesus is baptised by John, but as a voice from heaven declares him to be the Son of God (v. 11), we know he had no sin to turn from. Jesus really is the promised Lord with a message of good news: 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' (v. 15).

What is the good news? God's rule is going to be seen more clearly. The arrival of his long-promised King marks the beginning of God's rescue of us from sin, death and evil.

How should we respond to this good news of a rescuing King? We should be open to recognising who Jesus is, to turning from our sin and to believing this great news.

God has entered into the world he made and calls people to believe in him.

KEY IDEA

Mark's Gospel is all about good news. Jesus the Messiah – God's promised, rescuing King – is worth believing and following.

PRAYER

Dear God, thank you that Jesus – the promised, rescuing King – has come into our world. Please help me to understand more of this good news as I read Mark's Gospel, and especially to know more about who King Jesus is. Amen.

Who's the boss?

The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

There's a new celebrity in town, creating endless good-news stories of healings and freedom from demon possession. There's no fake news in the reports about him, and his popularity is growing!

Jesus has previously said that the kingdom of God is drawing near (v. 15), meaning God's rule will be more visible. He doesn't mean rule over a geographical area, but rule in people's lives. What will life under Jesus, God's King, look like? Jesus gives a glimpse of this as demons are overpowered, sickness is overcome and he teaches with an authority different from the religious teachers of the time. Today we still face evil and sickness, but one day this glimpse of Jesus' rule will be a universal reality.

Most of Jesus' audience are impressed by him but don't understand who he is – except the evil spirits. They are threatened as they recognise the power and authority of the one they call 'the Holy One of God' (v. 24). However, Jesus silences them when they shout this out.

Why does Jesus not want the demons broadcasting his identity? He is focused on his mission of spreading his kingdom by preaching the good news. A high-profile celebrity status would hinder this (as happens later, for example in verse 45).

The crowds begin to flock to Jesus, but he withdraws to pray. He won't be dictated to by crowds or demons; he must focus on the mission he has come to fulfil.

Why does Jesus not stay where he is popular and heals constantly? It's because he's the boss! His priority is to spread the good news. Jesus does amazing things to help many people, but his own agenda has priority.

This poses a challenge for us. Do we recognise Jesus has authority in this world and over our lives? Or do we just have a passing interest in his words and actions? Let's resolve to take his authority seriously as we listen more to what he said and did.

 **KEY IDEA**

Jesus sets the agenda as he teaches, heals and drives out demons. With all his authority, he still sets the agenda today!

PRAYER

Dear God, thank you for Jesus bringing in your rule in a new way, with the authority of God himself. Thank you for this glimpse of a future time with no more sickness or evil. Please help me to take Jesus' authority in this world seriously as I read more of what he said and did. Amen.

Sick or healthy?

... the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

If we know we're sick, we go to the doctor for help, hopeful for a cure. The man with leprosy, a contagious skin disease, knows he is sick and knows someone who can cure him.

But he wasn't just physically sick; he was classified as spiritually unclean and excluded from the community. He knows Jesus can heal him, but will he? Jesus is more than willing. He makes the man clean, both physically and spiritually in the eyes of God.

What sickness plagues the man on the mat? All can see he is paralysed, but Jesus first cures his spiritual sickness – he pronounces that the man's sins are forgiven (2:5). The teachers of the Jewish law are horrified. 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?' they think to themselves (2:7).

Any sin is ultimately against God, so Jesus has just claimed to do something which only God can do – blasphemy! Has Jesus the authority to forgive sins, the authority of God himself? After all, anyone could say those words, but how can we know it is a reality?

Jesus tells the man, 'Get up, take your mat and go home' ... and he does! (2:11–12). Jesus proves his authority to forgive by healing the man. So Jesus has authority to forgive us too! Have you asked him to forgive your sins?

The Pharisees (one kind of Jewish religious teacher) are good at spotting sin and spiritual sickness in others (2:16), but think they are healthy themselves (2:17). We need to recognise our problem of sin and ask Jesus to forgive us – he can and will!

 **KEY IDEA**

Jesus is more than able and willing to forgive us and make us spiritually clean, if we are willing to come to him for help.

PRAYER

Dear Jesus, thank you that you were concerned about the paralysed man's greatest problem of sin and had power to help. Thank you that you have power to forgive my sins too. Help me to confess my sin to you and then to rest in the peace of your forgiveness. Amen.

A new era

... the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

Everything about Jesus is different from the norm. Why? He's bringing in a totally new era. As such, he's like a bridegroom, so now is not a time for fasting. Like a new patch on old cloth or new wine in old wineskins, Jesus' new way doesn't fit into the old – everything is being renewed. But this makes upholders of the old status quo (like the Pharisees) very uncomfortable.

In particular, Jesus challenges their approach to the Sabbath, a sacred day of rest. The Pharisees believe that picking grain to eat is harvesting and therefore a work task that is forbidden on the Sabbath. In contrast, Jesus heals a man with a shrivelled hand on the Sabbath because his priority is to 'do good' (3:4).

Who gives Jesus the right to renew the use of the Sabbath? He simply declares that right himself in declaring himself the Son of Man, an Old Testament title for someone like God. As Son of Man, Jesus is Lord, or ruler, even of the Sabbath (2:28)!

Not surprisingly, this causes a reaction and brings together two unlikely groups of people. The Pharisees and Herodians (supporters of King Herod) are united in a plan to do away with Jesus...

Are we aware of the radically new way of thinking and living which Jesus brings? How much are we willing to follow Jesus' ways rather than the voices and traditions of our day? Is there a danger that we may be stubborn in response to Jesus' teaching (as the people are in 3:5)?

Let's ask God for hearts that are willing to listen to and follow Jesus even when his teaching may be new to us.

 **KEY IDEA**

As Lord, Jesus teaches us a new way of thinking and living. How will we respond?

PRAYER

Dear God in heaven, thank you for Jesus' example of not letting other people stop him from doing good to others, no matter what day it is. Please help me to be willing to listen and follow Jesus' teaching even if it's new and different from my old ways. Please continue to teach me more about Jesus as I read the Bible each day. In Jesus' name, amen.