

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 2 – Mark

The theme of the gospel according to Mark is **Christ the Servant** – not Christ the King, as with Matthew, but Christ the Servant – and the key text for that is Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man,” said Jesus referring to Himself, “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” His serving, consisting of teaching and healing, is the focus of the first part of the book (chapters 1-10), and His serving in giving His life a ransom for many is the subject of the second part (chapters 11-16). The Old Testament anticipates the coming of a conquering King, but the four Servant songs of Isaiah also prepare us for the coming of a suffering Servant (Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-7, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12).

Though King Jesus was given all power in heaven and on earth, His servant role was a vital part of why He came into the world as a Man to live among men. He tells us that He came not to do His own will but the will of Him, the Father, who sent Him. Even when He was facing the agony of hell on the cross, and so wanted to be spared having to drink from that cup, He cried to His heavenly Father, “Not what I will, but what You will” (Mark 14:36) – and with that He committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. But why did He come to live among men? It was to fulfil all righteousness (a task in which the first Adam failed), and with that to pay the price of ransom for the redemption of lost sinners so that everyone who believes in Him may have everlasting life. “This,” as He tells us, “is the will of the Father who sent Me” (see John 6:37-40).

But who now is Mark, and what do we know about him? John Mark lived in Jerusalem and was a son of Mary, a woman of some influence among the early Christians, and it was to her house that Peter fled when he was released from prison by an angel (Acts 12). Peter once referred to Mark as his son (1 Peter 5:13), not his biological son, but his son in the faith who sometimes travelled with him on his missionary journeys. Peter was Mark’s mentor and someone who clearly had considerable influence on his life and writing.

Mark was a younger cousin of Barnabas, and he accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. When they arrived at Perga in Pamphylia, however, Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. We are not given any reason for his sudden departure, but Paul was clearly unhappy about it. When a

second missionary journey was planned Barnabas wanted again to take Mark with them, but Paul sharply disagreed, and so they went their separate ways. Barnabas and Mark then set sail for Cyprus, and Paul went with Silas to Syria and Cilicia in order to renew acquaintances and strengthen the churches.

For the next ten years we know nothing at all of Mark, but these must have been years of his coming to greater maturity and regaining the trust and affection of Paul. When Paul was later imprisoned in Rome, for instance, awaiting this time to be put to death, he asked Timothy to come to him and to bring with him Mark, for he found him now (and so commended him) to be of use to him in ministry (2 Timothy 4:11). Whether Mark ever made it to Rome before Paul died we do not know, but what an altogether different assessment Paul had of him in those later years!

We can learn a great deal from this ourselves. On the one hand, apparent failure in one's youth does not rule out the possibility of exhibiting useful and effective service to the Lord later in life; we should not be too quick to write someone off, therefore, or presume that a slow start necessitates a disastrous finish. On the other hand, we should not be content with little or no spiritual growth in our own walk with the Lord; let us reach forward, rather, to those things which are yet ahead, pressing toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ!

There is very little in Mark's account of the gospel which is not recorded by the other evangelists, probably no more than about fifty verses, yet it does have its own unique style. It is not a biography – no reference is made to our Lord's pre-existence, or to His ancestry and early years – it begins with the public ministry of this Servant of the Lord and proceeds to move quickly from one event to the next with the cross of Calvary clearly before Him all the way. A Greek word which may be translated "immediately" is so characteristic of this book. It is used forty-two times, more frequently than in all the other New Testament books combined. Whatever Jesus did, or the crowds, it was followed "immediately" with something else, and thus our attention is drawn to the ongoing action of the narrative.

Mark draws our attention to the Servant's teaching ministry in a very particular way – not so much to its content, but to its authority, to its general appeal and effectiveness – and in this way we see how indispensable it was to His earthly mission. Our Lord no longer walks the streets of these towns and villages as He

once did, yet He has called His disciples to go into all the world to preach and teach this same gospel message. He still uses this means to call sinners to Himself, to disciple the nations, to build His Church, to extend and enhance His kingdom to the very ends of the earth. Are we engaged in such a ministry ourselves, whether directly, or indirectly by supporting those missionaries who go in our place?

Mark also draws our attention to the Servant's mighty works, His miracles especially and the impact they made on the people who witnessed them. Nineteen miracles are recorded, and it is important to appreciate their three-fold purpose: (1) they were a demonstration of the Lord's mercy to the weak and vulnerable; (2) they drew crowds to hear His teaching (though the report of them sometimes drew the wrong kind of attention, in which cases He would depart to other places); and (3) they were the confirming evidence that Jesus was of God and was therefore to be believed (Mark 16:20).

This last point is of very great practical importance and is not to be dismissed. Peter spoke of Jesus as a Man attested by God – how? – by miracles, wonders and signs, as the people themselves well knew (Acts 2:22). Later, the ministry of the apostles was confirmed in the same way (Hebrews 2:3,4). This ties the miracles to the teaching ministry itself, leaving those who witnessed them without excuse if they did not believe what they were taught. Today, we do not possess such extraordinary gifts of the Spirit to perform miracles, nor do we need them because we have the Holy Spirit Himself who bears witness to and with the Word on the hearts of those who hear it. If we believe the Scriptures, in other words, it is because the Spirit of Christ has opened the mind to understand it, the heart to embrace it and the will to act on it; He it is who makes us so willing in a day of His power.

Mark draws our attention, finally, to the Servant's ultimate mission, to the offering up of Himself as a ransom for many. This concept of the ransom takes us back to the book of Ruth and to the principle of a kinsman-redeemer which we find there. People who had been sold into slavery could be released from such bondage by their closest relative who, if he had the money and was willing, would pay the price of ransom to redeem them. We need to be released from that same kind of bondage to sin. The problem is that the price of sin is death and that

there is no one among the fallen sons of Adam who is without sin himself and can therefore pay it for us. Yet for this very reason God sent His own Son into the world, Jesus our Elder Brother, who offered up His own sinless life on the cross in order to pay the ransom on our behalf. (See Isaiah 53.) In the words of C.F. Alexander in describing the substitutionary atonement of Christ:

“There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.”

In closing, I want to focus on some practical application which we can draw out of this theme, Christ the Servant, for our own life. As our Kingsman-Redeemer, Jesus is the sinner’s one and only Saviour; as the Lord’s Suffering Servant to achieve that great work, He is our best and only flawless example of what it is to serve faithfully.

It is perfectly true, as the Scriptures everywhere teach, that salvation is by God’s grace alone, through a living faith in Christ alone, and not by any number of works which we might contribute of our own. Nevertheless, while we are not saved **by** good works, we are saved **for** good works (Ephesians 2:10), and any faith without such works is dead (James 2:17). It is quite possible, and all too easily done, to emphasize the role of Christ as Saviour so much that we forget He is also our chief example for living the Christian life, a tragic error we should dutifully avoid.

Are you an unbeliever? Cast yourself on the mercy of the Lord and know that Christ is able to save to the uttermost all who come unto God through Him.

Are you a believer, someone who has been made a new creation in Christ Jesus? This new life, dear Christian, is to be expressed in service. Jesus said to His disciples as He still says to us today, “whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant” (Mark 10:43). Are you willing to serve in order to grow in the likeness of Christ? Let’s follow the example of the Lord’s Servant as we seek to present our own bodies now a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God!

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