

# ***Truth for Today***

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **The Gospel writers and their subject - Mark**

In the world today, whether in business or social circles, there is pressure upon people not to make mistakes. There is a drive to be perfect, and the making of mistakes is looked upon as failure. This has so taken hold of some people that they go to any lengths to protect themselves from being seen as a failure. This attitude is not confined to individuals, but to organisations, and even governments. However, it is particularly sad when Christians fall into this culture.

The culture of hiding mistakes all started in the Garden of Eden, when the greatest failure of all time occurred: that of disobeying, and hiding away from, an all seeing God. The Bible is full of people who made mistakes, and for many the event was turned into a learning experience, so that the failure would not be repeated. Learning from mistakes is not confined to those who make them. Cain and Abel were two people who had opportunity to learn from their parents' mistake, and the solution that God provided. Abel understood correctly the lesson that God taught, but Cain did not. As a result Cain fell into a further mistake, which resulted in Abel being murdered by him.

It is vital therefore, to learn both from our own, and where possible, from the mistakes or failures of others. Learning in this way is just part of the process to develop a life which is pleasing to God.

### **MARK, THE GOSPEL WRITER**

The writer of the Gospel was a man called in the scriptures either Mark or John Mark. He was a person who made mistakes, but he also learned by those mistakes, and as a result became a more useful person. In chapter 14, after the Lord Jesus is taken prisoner, it states in verses 50 to 52, "Then they all forsook Him and fled. Now a certain young man followed Him (that is Jesus), having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body. And the young men (those who had taken Jesus prisoner) laid hold of him, and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked." It is thought by many Bible scholars that the young man who fled away, was Mark. Now you might say that it was only natural to escape, if your life is in danger; that is true. However, we sometimes need to face danger, especially if we want to serve our Lord and Master! Physical attack is one form of opposition. I mention this event as it is both the first encounter with Mark and secondly it highlights what might be considered a flaw in his character. You might think I am being a little hard on Mark, as the vast majority of people do not look for conflict, especially if there is a way of escape.

The second event to be noticed about Mark is on Paul's first missionary journey. Barnabas and Paul had a desire to go into many countries in the Middle East and spread the message of salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Barnabas and Paul included Mark, see Acts 12:25. However, we find that not long into the missionary journey, Mark departs from them and returns to Jerusalem, see Acts 13:13. Was it the difficulties encountered on the island of Paphos, as outlined in chapter 13; that turned Mark away? We are not told. This difficulty with Mark eventually causes a rift between Paul and Barnabas, see Acts 15:36-40. The rift was serious, as it separated two very useful servants of the Lord from working together. However, it potentially doubled the outreach activities, and may well have been the beginning of Mark's recovery.

Many years later, Paul is able to say of Mark, in 2 Timothy 4:11, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry (or service)." Mark had become a very reliable servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was surely through his experiences and, no doubt, the help of other Christians that he learned, developed, and grew spiritually. We do not hear of Mark blaming others. His actions were his own; he took responsibility. Paul had recognised that Mark was not ready for a second missionary journey, and no doubt knew that Mark had much to learn before becoming a useful servant of Jesus.

It is useful for all Christians, whether young or old, to know that a wrong decision is not the end. It is part of our Christian development, to make us better able to serve the Lord, so long as we acknowledge our failure and, with the Lord's help, seek to start again.

The Gospel of Mark is recognised as presenting the Lord Jesus Christ as the True Servant of God, the One who came to serve others. How wonderful, that God in His grace, chooses Mark, the servant who had made so many mistakes, to write the Gospel describing God's Perfect Servant.

Isaiah 42:1-4 state, "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice and truth. He will not fail nor be discouraged, till He has established justice in the earth." This portion of scripture covers not only the time when the Lord was here on earth but looks on to a coming day when He will establish a kingdom in justice and truth. Isaiah foretells God's perfect Servant. This Servant is different from all others: He does not make mistakes! Mark introduces the readers of his Gospel to God's Servant now here in this world.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Matthew and Luke provide details of the Lord's incarnation and genealogy: through Joseph, in the Gospel of Matthew; and through Mary, in the Gospel of Luke. John gives neither, but commences before time, introducing us to God the Son from all eternity. Mark is very different. his introduction is simply, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." What more fitting introduction to God's Servant. We read in Philippians 2:5, "(Jesus) made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant." So in Mark, the Lord sets out from 30 years of obscurity, into the light of public service, with little more than this brief introduction to His person. Some consider that the introduction given by Mark was due to the Gospel being aimed at non Jewish readers, probably those of a Roman background. However, it would also be a mark of a servant: who is interested in a servant's genealogy? No one. There is a unique point to be observed: this servant is the Son of God. The other marked feature of this Gospel is the word "straightway" (or "immediately"), mentioned in this Gospel as much as the other three Gospels together. It is the role of a servant to be told to do something, and then to act upon those instructions quickly. In Matthew and Luke we have the statement recorded, "I say to my servant, Do this and he does it".

This incident regarding a centurion and his servant is not recorded in Mark. The whole Gospel is of the character "Do this and He does it". There is an urgency in the Gospel of Mark, which is not so obvious elsewhere, a servant has no rest or time off; a servant is busy at all times; events happen immediately! Lastly, in regard to the temptation, Mark uses the word "driven", meaning, being chased into the wilderness. Matthew uses the word "carried", which is fitting for a King, and Luke uses the word "led" which is in tune with Jesus presented as a Man.

The Lord's baptism is mentioned only briefly, but God the Father's declaration to this True Servant of God is not diminished. His person must be acknowledged, as the Father's voice sounds out of heaven, declaring His pleasure in His beloved Son. What more can a servant desire, than the full approval of heaven.

The message that this Servant brings is summarised in 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." The Servant had come and in His person the kingdom of God was there. The demand of the message is for people to repent and believe God's good news.

## THE POWER OF GOD'S SERVANT

The power of God's Servant, Jesus, is seen in a number of ways:

### *Power to Heal*

The land of Israel was no different from the other countries of the world. Illness in a wide variety of forms afflicted this people, leprosy, paralysis, deformity, fever, deafness, blindness, and much more. The various illnesses that are recorded in this Gospel teach us two main things. First, illness is a part of a fallen creation, since the failure of Adam and Eve in the garden. Sin and its effects have been experienced by mankind ever since. Second, the natural things seen in Scripture often have spiritual lessons for us to learn:

- Leprosy, the way in which sin eats into the whole life of a person.
- Paralysis, unable to walk right for God.
- Deformity, the beauty of God's creation marred by sin.
- Fever, insensible to God.
- Deafness, unable to hear the word of God.
- Blindness, helpless in the darkness and not able to comprehend the one who is "the Light of the world".

The power of God's servant is clearly demonstrated in His ability to rectify the ravages of sin in this groaning creation. However, as illustrations of spiritual poverty, where mankind is not right with God, there is the need for the direct intervention of Jesus to save lost sinners and transform them into servants for God. More important than physical healing is the saving of a precious soul.

#### *Power over Death*

The final demonstration of sin in this world is that death has a claim over mankind. In Genesis chapter 2:17, the warning had been given by God, "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Since the disobedience of Adam and Eve, mankind has been dying. From the moment we are born the consequence of sin has meant that we are on the journey to death. But, since the cross, there is a Man who has defeated death. This victory over death is freely available to those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. At the end of Mark 5, we see the little girl brought back to life by the voice of the Saviour. The eternal life giving power of the True Servant was not a fully accomplished fact until Jesus died and rose again. This can be read in chapters 15 and 16.

#### *Power over Demons*

In dealing with demon possession, the Lord extends His power beyond physical illness to a far more serious area of affliction. The influence of the unseen world of Satan was clearly seen in people who were directly controlled by demons. Demons who along with Satan, had disobeyed God were now the cause of further opposition to God. Mark provides clear examples of the Lord's greatness in defeating this control. It is interesting to note that the demons both knew who Jesus was, and were aware of His power, see 3:11 and 5:1-20.

#### *Power over Creation*

Although Mark presents the Lord Jesus as the True Servant, His greatness as a divine person cannot be hid. Whether disease, death or demons, there may be those who would doubt that it was the work of God, and might consider that Jesus was just a man with extraordinary abilities. The following events demonstrate otherwise. The power to still the storm by a word of command could only be accomplished by God the Creator. Who is the creator of this wonderful universe, Jesus! His word of command was "Peace, be still! And the wind ceased and there was a great calm." What a display of power to the disciples who were afraid of the storm when the very Creator was asleep in the boat. They said amongst themselves, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!"

Further demonstrations of His power over creation are seen in the feeding of both the 5,000 and the 4,000, with only a small boy's picnic of bread and fish. Also, the walking on water in a storm again demonstrates the power over creation. No doubt, these true happenings were events which had an additional spiritual significance. Surely, they taught His disciples then, and ourselves now, that when circumstances appear to be out of or beyond our control, Jesus can and does come into them for our comfort and blessing. Often it is only when we realise our inability, that we see God at work, in and through our lives.

#### *Power of Attraction*

We have considered how the Lord Jesus by a touch, or a word, was able to banish disease, death and demons, and control creation. Now the voice of this glorious Servant is used to call disciples to Himself. We have an example of this in 2:14, "And as He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and said to him, "Follow Me." And he arose and followed Him." It is Levi, and all the others who have heard the call of Jesus, who are brought into the spiritual family of the Lord. Those who do not respond to the call that Jesus makes are those who reject him, as they did at the beginning of chapter 6. Of these people, amongst whom Jesus had grown up, we read that "He marvelled because of their unbelief." Christians are those who have responded to the Saviour's call and, as such, are expected to serve a risen Saviour.

### **LESSONS FOR SERVANTS**

The Gospel of Mark is also the servant's hand book. We need to observe and put into practice the way in which we see the True Servant living. In chapter 9 we have some of the guidelines brought to our attention.

*Prayer*

Prayer is a vital resource which links the believer to his Master. Mark, as he writes of the Perfect Servant, gives us the opportunity to learn the secret of a servant's strength. There are four examples as seen in, or taught by, the Lord for His servants to follow:

- a. In 6:46 we find the Lord alone on a mountain in prayer. It was after the feeding of the 5,000 and before He rejoined the disciples in the boat on the lake. There are times when we need to pray on our own, with thankfulness for service accomplished but to seek help and support for work that is ahead.
- b. Prayer is linked with fasting in chapter 9. There is a need for commitment; nothing is to come between the servant and his service for the Master. Fasting illustrates the point of commitment very clearly.
- c. Prayer is also linked with faith, as found in chapter 11. What we pray for must be in line with what God wants and we must believe that God will answer.
- d. Finally, prayer is linked with watching, for we know that our service is only until the Lord comes, 13:33.

*The Cross*

The Lord's service here ends at the cross. Jesus forewarned His disciples in 9:31, "The Son of man is being delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day." The True Servant's work was finished at the cross. The cross was the last great act of service both to God and mankind. At the cross, the judgement of God was meted out to the Sinless One, and the great salvation was made available to mankind. For the Christian, the cross has become the symbol of that which separates the Christian from the world system and those who do not believe. Those who accept Jesus as their Saviour belong to God; for them the judgement is passed. Those who do not believe in the Lord Jesus as their Saviour, judgement awaits them. This is both comforting for the servant and brings an urgency to the preaching of the gospel of salvation.

*Who is Great?*

In 9:33-37, the Lord shows the disciples the true path for those who desire to be first or chief. The one who has such a desire is to become last, and the servant to others. True greatness for the Christian company is to be seen in being willing to take the lowest place. The Lord Jesus became lowly and humble as we have in Philippians 2. He gave up all to take His place here. Let the servant be like the True Servant, his Master Jesus.

*The Focal Point for the Servant*

In verses 38-40 the disciples saw others serving the Lord, and working miracles in the Lord's name. The disciples wanted to restrict the service of these others, because they were not with them. The Lord, however, instructs the disciples not to restrict them, because, "He that is not against us is on our part." There may be those in other Christian companies whose service is just as valid as mine. Let us rejoice that they also serve the Lord. No Christian company has a monopoly on service, the truth or the right path to walk. We must all answer to our Master, because each one of us is His servant.

*Care and Responsibility*

In verse 42 we are reminded that we are responsible to be caring towards other Christians and not to act or say things which would offend, prevent, discourage or hinder another Christian. The Lord considers such irresponsibility as deserving a serious rebuke.

**IS CHRISTIANITY DIFFERENT?**

In 2:21-22, we have two illustrations intended to teach us that new and old cannot be mixed together - new and old cloth, and new wine in old bottles. This was an everyday illustration which the people would understand; it was common sense. What was the Lord referring to when He made this statement? the old was Judaism and the new was Christianity. How much difficulty was experienced by the early Christians when some tried to bring in Jewish traditions and practices. Let us be careful as God's servants, not to give a mixed message in our teaching and preaching. Let us clearly distinguish what belongs to the old and what is now the new of Christianity.

In Christianity the Spirit of God has a great place, much greater than before Jesus came. In John's Gospel, the Spirit is referred to as another divine person of the same character, ability and interest as the Lord. What is distinctive in Christianity is that the Spirit of God indwells every believer, from the moment that person trusts in the Lord Jesus as their Saviour. This was not true of those known as Old Testament believers. The Spirit of God has a very distinct place

and role in Christianity. We find that He does not speak about Himself or draw attention to Himself. He is the divine person who helps Christians to worship God the Father, and the Son, helps us to pray, helps to guide and direct our Christian walk, makes the presence of the Lord and the Father real to our hearts, opens up the scriptures so that we can learn and grow spiritually, and He is the one who binds every believer together in Christ.

Therefore, in Mark 3:22-30, when the scribes accused the Lord of doing His miracles by the power of Satan, this was an attack against the Spirit of God. Such blasphemy has serious consequences, as it puts a person who says such things, beyond salvation forever.

Finally, the parables in chapter 4, illustrate our responsibility to work and serve just as Jesus did so long ago.

- The sower's responsibility is to scatter the seed of the word of God. The hearer's responsibility is to obey.
- Our testimony for Jesus as a lamp or shining light in this world of darkness.
- Our obedience to the word of God as the only option for a servant.
- The power of the word of God to grow, "My word ... shall not return unto Me empty", (Isaiah 55:11). At the rapture, when all believers are caught up to heaven, then the fullness of the harvest will be seen.
- Finally, the mustard tree which is a herb grown all out of character. Let us make sure that what we sow in the hearts of people is the pure word of God.

Let us pray. Lord, help me to learn from this wonderful Gospel written by Mark so long ago and take up the challenge of service. Help me to see what You have given me to use for Your glory, that I may be a channel through whom blessing will flow. Amen.

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