

Truth for Today

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God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: Mark 1

Introduction

Before commencing our talk this morning on chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel, it would be advisable by way of introduction to say a few words about the writer and his Gospel.

Mark is considered to be the person mentioned in Acts 12, when Peter is delivered miraculously from prison. Peter goes to the house of Mary the mother of John whose surname was Mark. Peter may well have been instrumental in Mark's conversion as he refers to him (Marcus) as his son, presumably in the faith, in 1 Peter 5:13. Therefore, we find in Scripture that Mark is mentioned in three ways; Mark, John Mark or as John.

In Mark 14:52 there is mention of a young man who encountered difficulties after the Lord Jesus was arrested on the Mount of Olives. Mark is the only one to mention this incident and some scholars believe it was Mark himself. If this is the case then Mark had some early involvement and, to a limited extent, he may have been a follower of the Lord Jesus. Most scholars agree that Mark primarily gained the information documented in his Gospel from the Apostle Peter.

John Mark found the Christian life, and especially missionary activity, difficult at first. Mark is one of the companions who set off with Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey, read Acts 13. However, John Mark only stays with them for part of the time. Later, when another missionary journey is planned the inclusion or otherwise of Mark causes difficulty which results in Barnabas and Paul going separate ways. Mark and Barnabas were related and, no doubt, Barnabas was seeking to encourage Mark, whereas Paul was not wanting to have a repeat of the earlier failure. We should note that much later, when Paul was in prison at Rome, he considered Mark a very valuable worker in the Christian ministry, 2 Timothy 4:11.

Enough about Mark, what about his Gospel? Many people wonder why there are four Gospels. Each of the Gospels has a distinctive line of ministry.

Matthew is the Gospel of the King. It is Messianic with a message directed to the Jewish nation. The genealogy at the beginning of Matthew links the Lord Jesus to both David and Abraham, two great and prominent figures in Israel's history.

Luke writes for Gentiles presenting the Lord as the perfect man with a genealogy that traces the Lord Jesus to Adam and God as creator. Luke, a Gentile himself, writes to a Gentile called Theophilus who was a person of importance (1:3) but who needed further instruction in the Christian faith.

John writes a very different Gospel. He gives no genealogy but introduces the Lord Jesus as the one who is eternal and the Son of God. He has come to make God the Father known. The miracles (signs) that John records show unmistakably that Jesus is the Son of God.

What then is Mark's particular ministry? It is a busy Gospel as the narrative goes from one activity to the next, hardly without a pause. There is no genealogy in Mark. Mark briefly states, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God", 1:1. We are left in no doubt as to whom Mark is writing about. The other characteristic is the use of the word "immediately" (or "straightway" or similar depending upon translation). This gives the impression of a very busy person and many Bible scholars conclude that we have the picture of a servant, always following the bidding of another. When we think of the Lord Jesus Christ in this character of a servant then we have the "Perfect Servant" presented in Mark's Gospel. Therefore, Mark brings to our attention two important considerations. First, that of our Lord Jesus Christ serving His God and Father and secondly, if we want to be servants for our Lord and Saviour, then here is the instruction manual for service!

Mark's Gospel, according to church history, was written at Rome for a Roman audience and as such there are very few Old Testament references. Jewish words and customs are explained and we have Latin words used in the text. The activity or deeds of the Lord Jesus are prominent rather than teaching, since doing was more suited to the Roman

nature. Many have had difficulty in analysing the Gospel to provide a framework for study. This is mainly due to the flow of activity which dominates the book. The following is a suggestion for personal study:

- 1:1-11 the arrival and identity of this divine person.
- 1:12-13 His trustworthiness
- 1:14 to 13:37 the character and nature of the Perfect Servant's work
- 14:1 and 15:47 His obedience unto death
- 16:1-20 His resurrection to glory

We should state that although we refer to this Gospel as Mark's, we should always remember that what Mark recorded was totally under the direction and control of the Spirit of God. God is the author of Scripture. It is not Mark's thoughts that are documented, but God's.

We will now consider chapter 1 in more detail.

The arrival and identity of this divine person

Verse 1 gives the briefest of information. It can be compared with Philippians 2:7, referring to the Lord Jesus Christ as one who "made Himself of no reputation and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men". The Lord Jesus identifies with mankind, becoming like us, but without sin. As a servant portrayed in this Gospel, we find someone who was always extremely busy. No time to waste in a world of sin when His life was to be cut short. In verses 2 and 3, we have two references from the prophets, Malachi and Isaiah. Both prophets speak of John the Baptist as the one who would come first, to announce the coming of the Lord, to warn the people of Israel to be ready for their Messiah. What is not obvious from John's preaching is that the Messiah would come like a servant! John the Baptist was looking for a mighty royal personage to come and usher in the Kingdom of God.

In verses 4-8, we have a brief account of the work of John the Baptist. John's message was simple, a preaching of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The preaching was effective as a great number of people from the land of Judea and from Jerusalem came out to be baptised. John lived a rough existence dressed in garments made from camel's hair. He lived off the land eating locusts and wild honey. In practice, John rejected the lifestyle of ease and preferred to show that he lived a life of repentance and total separation from a corrupt world. Part of John's preaching was to do with the coming Messiah who was greater than himself. So great was the Messiah that John considered himself not even worthy to be a servant to loose the Messiah's sandals. John proclaimed that the Messiah would baptise with the Holy Spirit whereas John was using water. John understood the greatness of Jesus Christ but was amazed when he met Him at the river Jordan.

In verses 9-11 we have the Lord Jesus coming in a way that John least expected. Jesus came from the obscurity of a Galilean village called Nazareth. Jesus came not to overthrow the Romans and set up His Kingdom at that time, but to be baptised and to be identified with all those who looked for something new and different. Jesus authenticated the ministry of John and identified with all those who truly repented at John's preaching and who looked for the Messiah, the Son of God. What was not expected or understood immediately was the way in which Jesus came. Jesus came to teach and to preach repentance, to preach also the gospel of the kingdom of God and that the Messiah who had rights to reign must first be the Messiah who would suffer death on the cross, in other words, the Messiah of Isaiah 53, the Man of Sorrows!

In other Gospels, John does not want to baptise Jesus until he is told that it must be this way. Here the baptism takes places without any discussion. Mark is keen to get on with the servant's work. So, in verse 10, "immediately, coming up from the water, John saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon [Jesus] like a dove." Additionally a voice from heaven is heard saying, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." This is one of the occasions in Scripture, when we have a clear presentation of the three persons of the Godhead.

His trustworthiness

In verses 12-13, we have a brief reference to the temptation of the Lord Jesus by Satan. Here the Spirit drives the Lord Jesus Christ into the desert – there is no time for delay. Verse 13 simply states that Jesus was tempted, but no details are given as to what the temptations were. The Lord's only companions were the wild beasts and they would not trouble their Creator. At the end of forty days, angels come and minister to Him. From other Gospels, we read of Jesus' triumph over the temptations of Satan. Jesus depends upon the word of God to defeat Satan. This is in sharp contrast to the first temptation mentioned in Genesis when Adam and Eve failed miserably. Not so with Jesus, He can be depended upon.

The character and nature of the Perfect Servant's work

John the Baptist is replaced

Verse 14 is the point of change in God's ways with both Israel and this world. Although many came to John in repentance he was ignored by others, especially those who ruled in Israel. A new and altogether different person is now on the scene. Jesus of Nazareth is God's perfect Servant and the stage is set for the final attempt by God to see if Israel, and indeed the world, would listen to the message of repentance being proclaimed by the greatest man of all time and eternity – the Lord Jesus Christ!

The message

Verse 15 provides a summary of the message that the Lord Jesus has for this world, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." This was the right time in God's calendar. The main message in the Old Testament was the coming of God's appointed man and it was now. The kingdom of God was there present in the land of Israel in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The establishment of God's kingdom would depend upon how the Lord Jesus was received, with "hosannas" or "away with Him"! Repent and believe God's good news was the pathway to the kingdom, to blessing and being right with God. Accept God's message and accept God's man, the Lord Jesus Christ. Both go together.

The call to others

Verses 16-20, outline for us the way in which the first disciples are called to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. These are Simon (Peter), Andrew, James and John. They were probably already acquainted with the Lord Jesus (see John's Gospel chapter 1). The message is simple "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." As fishermen, they knew about fishing but the catch would be people, not fish. Notice in verses 18 and 20 that there was no hesitation. Is God calling you with the message of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Saviour of sinners? Are you hesitating?

Alternatively, as a Christian, are you ignoring a call to serve the Saviour? Are you too preoccupied with daily activities that you are not giving some of your time in serving your Lord?

The Perfect Servant at work

There are two activities connected with the work of the Lord Jesus, teaching and physical healing. From the Scriptures (the Old Testament), He taught clearly that His coming was completely in accord with the Scriptures. The healing of people were miracles which demonstrated that the power of God was in Him. Both His teaching and His miracles were for the good of the people.

His teaching

We should note that in verse 22 those who listened to the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ were astonished. Why were they astonished? As the Lord Jesus spoke, He spoke with an authoritative power. God, in the person of the Lord Jesus, was among the people teaching. Let us remember again, that God is the author of the Scriptures and every word is God given. In contrast, the scribes, who taught the law, had no authority because their lives contradicted their teaching!

The lesson for us to learn is that we too should teach the Scriptures with the same kind of authority. When we teach God's word, we teach the truth. This is not self-exaltation. Let us exalt the word of God as the only authority for Christians to live by. Let us not be slow or hesitant in proclaiming and defending God's word. Today, God and Christ are rejected and the butt of jokes. The word of God is ignored and sometimes corrupted by people for their own self-interest. Do we "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints", Jude 1:3?

His miracles

We might ask why miracles? The nation of Israel had a relationship with God, which was both tangible and intangible. Israel had things which they could do, the tangible:

- go to a physical temple
- offer sacrifices
- follow a very strict set of rules (not just the Ten Commandments)
- they knew from history that the prophets worked miracles

The intangible was faith. This was the only way to a right relationship with God. The father of the nation, Abraham, believed God and that was how he became righteous. Abraham's faith was key to his life with God.

By miracles the Lord Jesus was going to demonstrate that He was God.

The first miracle, according to Mark, is in the same synagogue where Jesus taught in the town of Capernaum. "There was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit", verse 23. Satan's opposition was not only in the wilderness with the direct temptations levelled against the Lord Jesus, but time and again, demon possessed people are found confronting the Lord as He taught and sought to help the people. In these verses, 23-28, we discover that although people did not recognise Jesus as the Son of God, the demons did – they knew Him as the Holy One of God. They knew the power that Jesus had – "Did You come to destroy us?" At that time, it was sufficient to banish the demon and liberate the person afflicted. If the people (verse 22) were astonished at the Lord's teaching, they are now astonished at His authority to banish demons. Notice this does not reach their conscience; there is no repentance and accepting Jesus as their Lord! But the fame of the Saviour goes throughout the land.

In verses 29-34, the next person the Lord Jesus helps is Peter's mother-in-law. Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever, and the Lord is able to immediately remedy the situation. Now there is a different response. Having been cured, she helps in a practical way regarding the needs of the visitors. During the evening, many people come to the Lord to be healed, including those who were demon possessed.

After a night's rest, verse 35, the Lord rises early before daylight to go and find a solitary place for a time of prayer. As we read the Gospels, we find many references to the Lord praying. The Lord demonstrated that prayer is important. As a man, Jesus found it necessary to pray. Jesus considered prayer necessary, do we? It is a big challenge to find adequate time for prayer. Not a hasty two minutes in the morning before rushing out to the activities of the day or a quick final prayer as our head touches the pillow and we are asleep before we can say "Amen"! There are two essentials for the day: prayer and reading God's word. We speak to our heavenly Father in our prayers and we listen to Him as we read the Scriptures. Daniel thought it necessary to pray three times a day. I would suggest that the minimum is to start the day with God and to end the day with God.

Verses 36-39 show that although many people were seeking the Lord Jesus, He was not interested in being a popular hero. The Lord tells His disciples that it is time to move on. There were many more places to visit even in the area of Galilee. The Lord went to the synagogues teaching and casting out more demons. Satan, through His demon followers, was intent on keeping people in bondage, demonstrating the evil power that he had. We are not told how these people came to be demon possessed, but it is well for people to keep away from anything that is satanic.

The last miracle in the chapter, from verse 40, has to do with a leper. The leper pleads with the Lord for healing; he says, "If You are willing". This draws from the heart of the Lord Jesus a compassion which reaches out to the man and He touches him and says "I am willing; be clean". People did not touch lepers, Jesus did! The Lord Jesus could not be contaminated as He is holy and sinless. Notice what happens in verse 42, the power of compassion healed the man immediately. It is the same with salvation, the moment a person truly accepts Jesus as their Saviour, they receive the forgiveness of sins, become indwelt by the Holy Spirit and have a guaranteed place in heaven.

Finally, the Lord sends the man away, to be obedient to the requirements of the law and to tell no one about what has happened. The Lord, as mentioned previously, was not interested in being a popular hero. The Lord had work to do. But the man could not keep quiet about the blessing that had come to him. So the crowds came to Jesus restricting the Lord as He endeavoured to travel around. Today it is different. When you come to know the Lord Jesus as your Saviour, then tell everyone you can what the Lord Jesus has done for you.

Mark chapter 1 is the commencement of the "Perfect Servant's" work on earth. The challenge to all believers is, have we commenced serving our Lord and Saviour?

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