

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A YALE BIBLE STUDY

with Allen Hilton

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

That’s where we begin. The Gospel of Mark began as a hundred episodes – remembrances of Jesus, some on scraps of paper, strewn across an ancient table, many still carried in oral memory. At the proper time, a thoughtful author chose some of those episodes – teachings, healings, anecdotes – and wove them together into one story that begins just before Jesus hits the scene as an adult and ends with the startling mystery of an empty tomb. Sometime around AD 70, probably in a Roman household, one of the few literate Christians in their living-room-sized gathering stood up and read out those words: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1.1).”

From that exquisite ancient moment flowed the world premiere of the very first beginning-middle-and-end story of Jesus’ ministry that we know – maybe the first any writer ever ventured. In rapid, almost breathless succession, Jesus gets baptized in the Jordan River by a prophet called John; speaks out wisdom and prophecy in the towns around his Galilean home; draws multitudes from whom he gathers and then trains twelve close disciples; heals those who suffer, performs wonders that change nature, tells profound stories, challenges the normal ways of the Jewish authorities, gets himself arrested by Roman soldiers, and dies by execution. At the outset of his third dead day, women from his following find his tomb empty and promptly go mysteriously quiet.

After twenty centuries of replays in households and worship services and studies and hotel rooms, it’s awfully difficult for you and me to imagine just what that first audience to Mark’s Gospel must have thought, felt, and done because of it.

- How did what he wrote meet how they lived?
- What questions did the fresh new story answer?
- What questions did it arouse?
- And how did their faith grow from having been there.

It’s a difficult task, this reimagining, but we’ll spend our time together in these eight sessions trying our level best to do just that: to recreate that original ancient experience of Mark’s Gospel. When we do, I can assure you that our vicarious listening will not be left ancient. Rather, it will prepare us to ask the very same questions they asked – and many others – about what the Gospel does to us now, in this strange year 2020.

Our Process

In a Zoom time we will be Zoom people. Yale Divinity School Continuing Education director, Kelly Morrissey, will host us. Here’s how we’ll do our time together.

- We’ll meet each Monday evening from Sept 21 to Nov 9, at 8 PM Eastern Time.
- I’ll present for 45-50 minutes, after which I’ll field questions from Zoom chat.

- After Q n A, I'll hang out on Zoom to talk with any of you who want to stay around.
- Each Monday, you'll receive an e-mail reminder of the class, along with a Zoom link.
- That e-mail will also include a link which will take you to the class page, where you'll find:
 - The prep guide for that evening's class.
 - The prep guide for the NEXT Monday's class.
 - The recordings and prep guides from prior weeks.
- If you have questions you don't feel comfortable asking on chat in class, you may e-mail me (Allen Hilton) at allen@houseunitedmovement.org.
- This study builds on the 2006 Yale Bible Study series led by Drs. David Bartlett and Allen Hilton. What we do together in these weeks will become a part of that resource. As participants, you and I will contribute to the shape of that study. Please use the Yale Bible Study web resources as much as you wish throughout this course.

If you have any trouble joining the first Zoom call, please let us know through that e-mail address (allen@houseunitedmovement.org).

Our History

Our Schedule

Here's your map to the eight weeks. I've included a description of the session's topics, the part of Mark we'll look at together, and some questions you might want to ask as you read. PLEASE KNOW THAT NO PREPARATION WILL BE REQUIRED. If you have time and want to prep for our time together, the questions are intended to focus your reading. With that in mind, here's our path.

21SEP20 The Good News about Jesus Right on Time (Mark 1.1-15)

In this session, we will fly over the whole Gospel of Mark to get a glimpse of its main themes and imagine together the ancient Christian community who received it. Then we'll focus our gaze on the very first paragraphs of the book, to start our momentum through Mark.

Thoughts for Preparation:

- Read through the whole Gospel of Mark, experiencing it as a single story, as if you're reading it for the first time. Notice the kind of things you'd look for in a novel or a short story: its plot, its main characters, etc. (Note: I say this, not because I think Mark is a fiction writer, but because he tells Jesus' life in the form of a story.) Once you have read, ask yourself how you'd describe the Jesus who is at the center of this book.
- Read carefully through Mark 1.1-15. What does the author accomplish in these first paragraphs? Whom do we meet? What do you know by the end of these verses that you didn't know before?

28SEPT20 Observing the Opposition (Mark 1.16—3.34)

One of the ways Mark reveals the character of Jesus is by his brushes with opponents: the demonic powers that swirl, the Jewish leaders who challenge, and the Roman rulers who ultimately sentence him. In this session, we'll watch Mark do this and see how his characterization of these opponents help us better understand his Jesus.

Preparation:

- Read 1.16 through 3.34, paying special attention to how conflict characterizes both Jesus and his opponents. What motivates Jesus? What motivates the people who challenge him? How does
- Demons will play an important part as characters in this drama. How do these unseen evil forces compute in your post-Enlightenment, post-Scientific-Revolution mind?

05OCT20 Four Stories, One Storm, and Three Saves (Mark 4—5)

Jesus was a master teacher, and he famously used stories (parables) to drive home truth that mattered. But we shouldn't imagine Mark's Jesus as guru at the top of a mountain waiting for inquirers. Immediately after speaking parables to a large crowd in Mark 4, Jesus stills a storm on the Sea of Galilee and then calms storms in three human lives in Mark 5. In this session, we will focus on a Jesus who speaks AND acts.

Preparation:

- Read the Parable of the Sower (just Mark 4.3-9) carefully and well, as if you've never heard it before. Why do you think Jesus tells that particular story at this point in the action? If you only had these 7 verses, what would you think he is talking about? How does Mark's insider explanation (Mark 4.13-20) line up with your perception of the story?
- Ask the same kind of question for the other three parables. Why does Jesus talk about shining or hiding a lamp, seed that grows unnoticed, and a small seed that becomes a large tree?
- Read Mark 5 and watch how Jesus casts out a demon, heals a woman who has a mysterious hemorrhage, and raises a young girl from death. What do we learn about Jesus through these episodes?

12OCT20 Dealing with Daft Disciples (Mark 6—8)

Jesus' disciples are iconic. They populate the faith hall of fame. For centuries, Bible scholars thought Mark was a clumsy collector, merely collecting the pearls of Jesus' life to put on his tattered string. Only recently, New Testament experts have begun to credit Mark's artistry as an author. In Mark 6—10, the author deftly paints an unflattering portrait of Jesus' 12 disciples (who would later become revered saints). In this session, we'll get real with Jesus' followers and appreciate Mark's brilliance as an author.

Preparation:

- In the early parts of Mark 6, Jesus gets thrown out of his hometown synagogue and learns that John the Baptist has been executed. How does that response to Jesus compare to what had been happening in chapters 4 and 5?
- Notice the mission of Jesus' disciples in 6.6-13. What adjectives would you use to describe the disciples there?
- Read the famous "Feeding of the Five Thousand" in Mark 6.30-44. Watch how the disciples respond. Then read the less famous "Feeding of the Four Thousand" in Mark 8.1-10 and watch how the disciples respond. Why tell the second story?

19OCT20 Who is Jesus and How Do We Follow Him? (Mark 8.22—10.52)

Insights on leadership sell. Our bookstores and newsfeeds host a constant flow of gurus holding forth on the topic. Given the feeble, faithful disciples we recognized last week, Jesus could have fired them all and started over. Instead he formed them, and 8.22 through 10.22 give us a window into that process. This is a GREAT session for anyone who really wants to learn what it is to follow Jesus.

Preparation:

- Read Jesus' three "passion predictions" in Mark 8.22-33; 9.30-37; and 10.32-40. What do you notice about the disciples' level of comprehension? How does Jesus' reflection on discipleship in 8.34-38 matter for each of the other two times that he talks about his death?
- How does Jesus picture leadership for his disciples in Mark 10.41-45? How does it compare to the way leadership goes in the world around them?
- You've probably played the kids' game, "If Aladdin showed up and gave you one wish, what would it be?" Mark's Jesus plays Aladdin with James and John (in Mark 10.36) and the Blind Bartimaeus (10.51). What do you think of their answers?

26OCT20 Bright Lights, Big City (Mark 11.1—14.2)

Sometimes we forget that Jesus was a country boy, born to a small-town family and raised in the hill country of Galilee. In these chapters, Mark's Jesus takes his only trip to Jerusalem, the largest city in ancient Palestine, and the power center for Roman and Jewish authorities. It's no wonder Jesus' country disciples marvel, "Whoa! Look at the size of these buildings!" (Mark 13.1) In this session, we'll notice the conflict that arises when Jesus brings his vision and his followers into this hornet's nest of power.

Preparation:

- Read the famous account of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem (11.1-11). There's a whole lot of symbolism in it. What do Jesus' followers think the event means? What does he seem to want it to mean?
- What is Jesus trying to get done when he raises a ruckus in the Temple (11.15-19)
- Who wins the extended, multi-member conflict of Mark 12? What do we learn about the Jewish leaders who question Jesus? What do we learn about Jesus and his purposes?
- Mark 13 features the famous "Little Apocalypse" because it features mysterious knowledge about the future and a divine judgment on the ways of earth. People often take it out of its context and compare it to Revelation and other apocalypses. We'll read it in context. How have chapters 11—12 prepared the disciples (and us) for this content?

02NOV20 The Passion (Mark 14.1—15.47)

One influential NT scholar characterized the Gospel of Mark as "a passion narrative (the story of Jesus' death) with an extended introduction." You and I have seen that it is much more than that, but the cross is crucial for Mark's understanding of Jesus' identity and message. In this session, we will follow Jesus from the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane to the High Priest's palace to the office of the Roman governor and on to the crucifixion. At each stop we'll ask how the Jesus of the passion continues to be the one we've known since he showed up in Galilee.

Preparation:

- Read the familiar story of Jesus' last supper with his disciples, but this time notice the mysterious secrecy of his arrangements of the room (as with the same sort of arrangements for the donkey of Palm Sunday). Does Jesus know people in Jerusalem?
- Put yourself in the disciples' place. What does Jesus seem to be telling you? And how well have you done at understanding his meaning earlier in the Gospel?
- Put yourself in Jesus' place. Knowing what lies ahead and the role his disciples would play in it, would you have eaten with them if you were he?
- What do you think motivated Judas' betrayal? (14.10-11, 43-45) How could we even begin to guess? What do you think motivated Peter's denials? (14.66-72)
- What is the main issue of Jesus' trial before the High Priest's Council? And what is the main issue in the trial before Pilate?
- How would you characterize Jesus on the cross if you only had Mark telling you about it?

- What do you think it means when the Roman soldier looks at a dead man and says he is God's son?

09NOV20 Resurrection (Mark 16.1-8)

One whole session for eight verses. Wow! That must mean they're important. It also means that we have an opportunity to notice things. Why the mysterious absence of Jesus' male disciples and silence of his female disciples at the empty tomb? How has the whole Gospel led to this moment? And how does this moment lead to the whole future of Christ's church? In this session, we'll bring our study of this powerful Gospel to a significant close, asking how the whole book matters for our whole lives.

Preparation:

- There is near consensus among NT scholars that the Gospel ends at 16.8. Why do you imagine early Christians who copied Mark's manuscript or copies of it eventually added the stories we see in the verses that follow 16.8 in your Bible?
- Think of the last Easter service you attended. Did you hear the Gospel of Mark? Or did you hear about Jesus appearing to his disciples in Matthew, Luke, or John. What in the world is Mark doing by finishing his story with disciples who are scared out of their minds? And what is his Easter message?
- Does it mean anything that the women disciples show up on Sunday, while the men stay locked away somewhere?
- What themes that you've learned from reading the rest of the Gospel make their way into the way the resurrection happens?
- How does this resurrection scene impact the way you live your life now?

Final Thought

The Gospel of Mark has changed millions of lives in its 19.5 centuries in circulation. Just consider all of those people from around the world and across time, and it's enough to give you the chills. The book has been translated into every human language, so six continents of human populations have been touched. In this study, we get to add our lives to that list on a deeper level. This brief, brilliant account of Jesus' life is more than worth our time and close reading. So...let's go!