

A GOSPEL FOR TODAY

Mark 16:15-16

INTRODUCTION

- A. It is important that we allow each gospel to speak its unique message. We have four gospels, not one. Each has a peculiar flavor, an individual twist.
- B. It is tempting, when approaching a gospel book like Mark, to spend all our time and efforts studying about the mind and heart and ministry and personality of Jesus Christ.
 - 1. Let's step back from this book just enough to explore the reasons for why such a book would have been written.
 - 2. We will look at the author and audience of Mark in an attempt to understand better the picture of Jesus that is painted in this gospel.
- C. Why would anyone write a gospel?
 - 1. Luke, for instance, writes for a gentile audience in order to give an "orderly account" of Christ's life.
 - 2. John is not interested so much in order - he is concerned with theology.
 - 3. Matthew wrote an "apologetic" gospel, proving that Jesus was the Messiah to a predominantly Jewish audience.
- D. Mark wrote to persuade, to inform, to convince.
 - 1. But he also wrote, it seems, to minister to a group of Christians who were hurting and who were considering leaving the faith. The emphasis in Mark is distinct.
 - 2. The focus on suffering and discipleship is pronounced.
 - 3. The promise of persecution and the admonition to persevere is consistent.
 - 4. Why would Mark write on these particular themes unless he knew that the people to whom he wrote needed to hear some lessons along these lines?

I. Early Tradition Regarding the Gospel of Mark.

A. The "Church Fathers".

- 1. It was understood by the early church that this gospel was written by Mark, who was intimately associated with the Apostle Peter, for the Christians of Rome.
- 2. Papias (ca. A.D. 140) - *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15
And the Elder said this also: Mark, who became Peter's interpreter, wrote accurately, though not in order, all that he remembered of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had neither heard the Lord nor been one of his followers, but afterwards, as I said, he had followed Peter, who used to compose his discourses with a view to the needs of his hearers, but not as though he were drawing up a connected account of the Lord's sayings. So Mark made no mistake in thus recording some things just as he remembered them. For he was careful of this one thing, to omit none of the things he had heard and to make no untrue statements therein.
 - a. Behind this gospel is the eyewitness account and apostolic authority of Peter.
 - b. Mark was not concerned to write a chronological biography of Jesus but—like his mentor Peter—to remember everything he could about Christ's life and to apply it to the needs of his readers.

B. John Mark in the Biblical Tradition.

- 1. There is no indication that John Mark was a disciple of Jesus during his earthly ministry.
 - a. We know he was a Jew, living in Jerusalem (Ac 12:12), so that he probably knew of Jesus.
 - b. Some people see a reference to Mark in the young man who ran away naked the night Jesus was betrayed (Mk 14:51-52).
- 2. What we know of Mark is from years after the resurrection.

- a. It is to Mark's mother's house that Peter fled when miraculously released from prison (Ac 12:12 - A.D. 44?).
- b. Later, Mark joined the missionary team of Saul and Barnabas (Mark's cousin - Col 4:10) (Ac 12:25 - A.D. 46).
- c. He traveled with Paul and Barnabas to Cyprus and the coast of Asia, but returned to Jerusalem when the team turned inland.
- d. Paul refused to give Mark another chance on the second missionary journey, so Barnabas took his cousin and returned to Cyprus (Ac 15:36-41 - A.D. 49)
- e. 12 years later, however (ca. A.D. 61), Mark is with Paul in Rome (Col 4:10; Phm 24) and 5 years after that, Paul would write that Mark "is very helpful to me in my ministry" (2Ti 4:11).
- f. Mark appears to have been in Rome at the time both Paul and Peter are imprisoned and martyred (2Ti 4:11; 1Pe 5:13 - ca. A.D. 67/68).

II. The Situation at Rome in the Late 60's.

A. Nero and Rome (A.D. 54-68).

1. First five years were governed responsibly.
2. Nero began to show his true colors:
 - a. Heavy taxations and false accusations.
 - b. Ordering of suicides at public banquets.
3. The fire of 64:
 - a. Only 4 of 14 wards were spared - 3 were destroyed.
 - b. The Romans rumored that Nero had set the fire to allow more room for building his palace.
 - c. Looking for a scapegoat.

B. The Church and Rome.

1. Before A.D. 64, the church in Rome was unmolested.
 - a. There is no evidence of persecution in *Romans*, written around A.D. 57. In fact, Paul refers (at least in principle) to Nero when he calls the "*one in authority . . . God's servant to do you good*" (**Ro 13:4**).
 - b. The picture of conditions for Christians in the early 60's (from Acts 28) is good. Paul could preach "boldly and without hindrance" (Ac 28:31), and even had access to Nero's household (Ph 1:13; 4:22).
2. The situation changed in A.D. 64.
 - a. Statement by Tacitus, *Annals*, XV. 44. (ca. A. D. 100)
 [Nothing] could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to suppress the rumor, Nero fabricated scapegoats, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. . . .
 First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; then, on their information, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for the hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beast's skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the garb of a charioteer, or mounted on his chariot. Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest.
 - b. The church goes underground - literally.
 - i. It was during this period that the Christians took to the catacombs.
 - ii. Suppression of the church was state policy for three centuries.

C. The Task of Mark

1. To write a gospel that will encourage the Roman Christians to remain faithful in suffering.
2. To accomplish this by showing Jesus as one who understood suffering and encouraged his disciples to stay true in the face of suffering.
3. To show that nothing the Roman Christians could suffer at the hands of Nero was alien to the experience of Jesus.

III. Overview of the "Suffering" Theme in Mark with Rome in Mind.

A. The example of Jesus to remain faithful in suffering.

1. Jesus knew what it was to have people turn against him.
 - a. His family thought he was out of his mind (3:21).
 - b. His hometown "took offense at him" (6:3).
 - c. Jewish leaders called him *demon possessed* (3:22) and a *blasphemer* (2:7).
 - d. The crowds that first loved him turned against him in the end (15:11).
 - e. His friends deserted him (14:50). One of them betrayed him (14:44-45). Another denied him (14:66-72).
2. Jesus knew what it was to live under threat of death.
 - a. From the beginning and throughout his ministry, the Jewish leaders had looked for a way to kill him (3:1, 6; 11:18; 14:1).
 - b. He knew that he was walking the path to death (4 specific predictions of death in Mark: 8:31; 9:12; 9:31; 10:33-34).
 - c. Jesus knew the agony of waiting for the soldiers to come (14:33). He had prayed to be spared (14:35).
 - d. Above all, though, he showed his desire to do God's will rather than his own (14:36).
3. Jesus knew what it was like to suffer and die.
 - a. He was spit on, beaten and mocked by guards (14:65).
 - b. He was flogged, ridiculed, struck and spit upon by Roman soldiers (15:15-20).
 - c. He was crucified by the Romans (15:24) and insulted by the Jews (15:29-32).
 - d. "Have not suffered to death...", Heb. 12:4

B. The Teachings of Jesus to remain faithful in suffering.

1. In the parable of the sower (Mk 4:1-20), Jesus describes a kind of hearer who is like seed sown in rocky places - *"Since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away" (vs 17).*
2. **Mark 8:34-38; 10:29-31; 13:9-13.**

CLOSING

1. It is the responsibility of the church of each generation to present a Jesus who addresses the concerns and troubles of that generation.
2. We are all in the "gospel writing" business.
3. First, we must know the building blocks. Then we can figure out how to put them together in a way that lives and breathes today.
4. **Mk 13:10, 16:15-16**