

THE GOSPEL OF
MARK



The mystery of the Kingdom Revealed

BY CHARLES DUNAHOO

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PREFACE

First: You will discover here that Mark's work is a kingdom gospel that recognizes the "now" and "not yet" aspects of the kingdom of God. Mark's focus is mainly on the "now" aspect of the kingdom, which is constantly moving toward the eschaton or fulfillment of the kingdom upon the return to earth of Jesus Christ; thus, this focus sets our direction in this study.

Second: Because Mark's Gospel is also about discipleship, especially the making of kingdom disciples, it would be helpful to read my *Making Kingdom Disciples: A New Framework*, published by P&R Publishing, and available from the CEP Bookstore at 800-283-1357 or from the CEP website at www.cepbookstore.com.

Third: This book is written for group study; however, it can be read as an individual study. At the end of each chapter we have included questions for discussion. Having taught this material to two groups, one with 15 members and another with 40, we find that you can also intersperse these questions, or some of them, within the study.

Fourth: We have chosen to use the simplest outline form for each chapter, one that can be easily reproduced for group use. Please give special notice to point number seven of chapter one because it explains something of the approach used in the study.

As you read and study *The Mystery of the Kingdom*, my purpose for you is to experience the joy, delight, and challenge that I did learning more of the mysteries of the kingdom found in this Gospel story.

Charles H. Dunahoo
Coordinator, CEP

Mark 1:1-14

1. GOSPELS – SYNOPTICS
2. UNIFYING THEME OF MARK
3. GOD'S INSPIRED WORD
4. MARK'S GOSPEL, COMPARE AND CONTRAST
5. WRITTEN BY MARK FROM PETER'S TESTIMONY
6. A MORE THEMATIC GOSPEL
7. PROCEDURES FOR THIS STUDY
8. A REQUEST AS YOU STUDY
9. OUR OBJECTIVE IN STUDYING MARK
10. RESOURCES

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

1. Gospels (Synoptics)

Mark is one of the four Gospels, and one of three (along with Matthew and Luke) that are called the Synoptic Gospels. John is excluded from that group. Synoptics are notable for their similarities, basically using the same material—“synoptic” refers to “seeing together.” John’s Gospel, while it has some passages that cover the same events as the synoptics, is quite different in its genre. John’s book has been called the most theological in style, although the synoptics are certainly theological in their style and content. While the four Gospels have the same message or story line, each has a unique approach which reflects how the Holy Spirit not only inspires the words written, but does so in a way that reflects some of the human authors’ characteristics.

2. Unifying Theme of Mark

While the Bible is made up of many stories and much history over hundreds of years, written by a multitude of authors, there is one unifying theme: the unfolding drama of the kingdom of God, and more specifically the drama of covenant history. Mark is part of that drama. Mark is not a biography of Jesus Christ even though it contains much information about his life. The same is true of Matthew, Luke, and John. Of course when you put the four Gospels together, within the drama of the coming of the kingdom and the unfolding of the covenant, you can construct a general biography of Christ, which many authors have done.

3. God’s Inspired Word

We read, study, preach, and teach the Bible from the perspective that this is God’s inspired Word, with the Holy Spirit as the ultimate author of each text. Therefore, as you study, do not be hung up on what Luke tells about this episode and why Mark does or does not, or why John is a different style from the others. Each writer was moved along by the Holy Spirit to write the very Word of God. (We use the terms “Bible,” “the Word,” and “Scriptures” interchangeably.) The Bible is not man’s words about God nor simply man’s witness to God. The Bible is not a book mechanically written by the Holy Spirit and given to us in a way similar to that depicted in Cecil B. DeMille’s *Ten Commandments*, where God is shown as writing the law with his finger on tablets of stones. When we read the Bible, as I explain in my *Foundation and Authority*, a primer based on our Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), Chapter One, “Of the Holy Scripture,” *“the words of Scripture are not simply words that man wrote which God at sometime or other may or may not choose to make alive to the reader or hearer. Though they are words penned by the human authors, they are the very Word of God not written in mechanical dictation method but supernaturally written as God breathed out his words through men. While it is true that when we are talking about the supernatural and there are things that we will never fully comprehend, the Scriptures are given, along with the Holy Spirit, to teach us, to correct us when wrong, to instruct us in righteous living.”* (*Foundation and Authority*, page vi)

While some have argued that the WCF should have started with the doctrine of God and not Scripture, we believe that unless we start with Scripture, God’s written revelation of himself, we might not have the right view of God. Scripture

as God's inspired Word is our starting point. Regarding inspiration, some say that God breathed his words into the writers and they wrote those very words, which would be fantastic, if that were the case. Inspiration means that God breathed out his words through the writers so that they wrote not only their own words, but the very Word of God. That's one of the amazing things about the Bible. It has come to us in a diversity of patterns over the centuries but the story line is basically the same, the kingdom of God with all its covenant dimensions. That's why we do not need to be sidetracked by things such as: Chronicles containing a little different account than Kings or Samuel at some places. Or why Matthew says this and Mark says that. This is what inspiration is all about: God breathing out his Word through the words of men.

As the WCF reminds us, because this is God's Word, it interprets itself. It is the revelation of God, his covenant promises, and our privileges and responsibilities as a result. We believe Scripture is the final interpreter of Scripture. We can learn much about the Bible from other sources, especially from studying its historical context, but the final determiner of what the Bible says and means is the Holy Spirit working in and through the written Word. The author of the Word determines the meaning of the Word, and we are to attempt through study to understand the intent of the Word.

4. Mark's Gospel, Compare and Contrast

Mark's Gospel is unique, as one commentator has pointed out, in that it begins in 1:1 and ends rather abruptly in Chapter 16. Matthew begins with Jesus' ancestry—the conception, birth, and naming of Jesus. Luke begins with the narrative of John the Baptist's birth. John begins with Jesus the Word preexistent from all eternity, before he became incarnate.

Mark was written by John Mark. Although sometimes referred to as “the anonymous gospel,” good tradition identifies John Mark as the author. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in the early second century, along with Irenaeus from the second century, and later Eusebius make the connection. All three are generally accepted as reliable testimonies to the author and to his purpose in writing, to interpret Peter's testimony.

Papias makes a clarifying statement that is helpful at the outset. He says that while Mark's writing is accurate and completely reliable (although he was not one of the Twelve disciples by Jesus), Mark did not write chronologically.

Eusebius wrote, “The reference to Peter ‘teaching as necessity demanded’ “ is elaborated in a further testimony of Eusebius, the substance of which he attributed to the late-second-century church father Clement of Alexandria, another reliable source.

5. Written by Mark from Peter's Testimony

“When Peter had publicly preached the Word at Rome, and by the Spirit had proclaimed the Gospel, those present, who were many, exhorted Mark, as one who had followed Peter for a long time and remembered what had been spoken, to make a record of what was said; and that he did this, and distributed the Gospel among those that asked him.” (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

Thus we have the perspective that Peter was the key source for Mark—that the Gospel of Mark was Peter’s memoirs—unanimously agreed on by the early church. “From a variety of traditions from the end of the first century onward, we see a complimentary testimony that the author of the second Gospel is Mark, the interpreter of Peter, who composed the Gospel in Rome.” Much more could be said about John Mark, but “a final New Testament reference shows him laboring with Peter in Rome (1 Peter 5:13). According to Patristic tradition, Mark evangelized Egypt. “We will see throughout the study how Mark relied on Peter’s testimony to write what he did” (Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 4ff.).

It is generally agreed that Mark wrote either near the end of Peter’s life or shortly after his death, which was in the AD 60s.

6. A More Thematic Gospel

In one sense we will find this Gospel to be written from a more thematic approach than as a chronological calendar of events.

This is in contrast with the other Gospels: Matthew was written in a narrative format and primarily to a Jewish audience; John used a more theological approach; and Luke wrote a great deal in parables and stories. Some say that Mark’s Gospel is a lackluster kind of writing, an assertion to which I take issue. Others have seen Mark as a clumsy writer, whatever that means. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that scholars came to see the importance of Mark’s Gospel. Mark did not follow Matthew, Luke, or John, but predated those three. Since the mid-1900s the earlier ideas about Mark’s writing have been laid to rest. Mark’s Gospel has a unique literary style, with his use of irony, the “sandwich technique,” special themes of insiders-outsiders, the command to silence, and the journey. It is now generally held that Mark did a beautiful job of portraying a profoundly theological concept of Jesus as the authoritative yet suffering Son of God (Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 2–3).

What some suggest is that we have one Gospel story in four versions.

Certainly while the main emphasis is on Jesus, the suffering Son of God, Mark also made clear—maybe more than the others—that the disciples would suffer like their king, which suggests that he was writing to Christians undergoing persecution. His audience was primarily people in Rome or Gentiles, in contrast with Matthew’s Jewish context.

7. Procedures for This Study

Before you jump in and begin this study, note that I will not deal with every chapter and verse of Mark. Several of the chapters may require two sessions, including the two opening chapters. Also, realize at the outset that this is not a detailed exegetical study of Mark, although I hope it will reflect good exegesis. Nor is this an inductive study in which you will be asked what you think certain passages mean—although each chapter will contain questions for discussion. Each lesson will contain enough material to assist you in the study of the topics.

If you want to go deeper than group time allows, we recommend other resources. Our desire and prayer are for you to become more familiar with Mark and its place within God’s grand biblical scheme; however, it is also our prayer and intent that based on what you read, study, and learn, your understanding of God’s revelation will increase and you will

have an even greater faith in Christ, desiring to follow, obey, and please him. The Word is not intended simply to give us knowledge. In my book, *Making Kingdom Disciples: A New Framework*, I develop the idea that if you really know something, it will have some kind of transforming life impact on you; otherwise, you have not really learned it.

8. A Request as You Study

Pray, read, study, and be teachable, willing to apply the Word to your life.

This will require prayer for the Holy Spirit to bless and use this study to show you more clearly his will and plan for your life. This will require you to become more and more familiar with Mark and to have a teachable spirit that will enable you not only to understand but to apply to your life what you learn. If you bring those things with you, you will have a great time together looking into this wonderful Gospel, the one I call the Kingdom Gospel, something I'll explain as we continue.

Incorporate this background into your study and then use these key questions:

1. Why is it important to know that Mark is one of the three Synoptic Gospels and what difference does that make?
2. From what you have read, how is Mark similar and dissimilar to the other Gospel accounts?
3. Regarding "inspiration," what is the difference between breathing in and breathing out, and what difference does that make in our understanding?
4. What is the purpose of saying, as does the WCF, that Scripture is its own interpreter, and does that mean we do not need someone to teach us?

9. Our Objective in Studying Mark

Using the questions below as your guide, what should we anticipate learning from this entire study?

1. Briefly describe the kingdom of God. Read Chapter Three in *Making Kingdom Disciples*.
2. Who wrote the Gospel of Mark?
3. What are the Synoptics and why is John's Gospel not considered one of them?
4. How is Mark similar to the other Gospels?
5. How is Mark dissimilar to the other Gospels?
6. What would you say is the theme of the Gospel of Mark?

7. Why did the people have difficulty recognizing and believing in Jesus?
8. Why did the disciples have the same problem?
9. What was Jesus' most common self-designation in Mark?
10. What were the similarities and dissimilarities in the two miraculous feedings of the multitudes?
11. What was significant about the mount of transfiguration?
12. Upon entering Jerusalem several times, why did Jesus focus on the temple?
13. In taking a kingdom approach to Mark, what is the most noticeable result?
14. What difference does the study of Mark make in my life? In the life of the church? Of the culture and world?
15. What was the most significant thing you learned from this study?

10. Resources

Listed below are several books I found especially helpful in studying Mark's Gospel. I have referenced these more than any other.

- *Making Kingdom Disciples: A New Framework*, Charles H. Dunahoo, P&R Publishing.
- *The NIV Bible Commentary, Volume 2, New Testament*, Kenneth L. Barker and John Kohlenberger III, Consulting Editors. This is an abridgment of the 12-volume *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 1994.
- *Promise and Deliverance*, S. G. de Graaf, Vol. III, *Christ's Ministry and Death*, Paideia Press, 1979, from one of the most helpful series of books on teaching the Bible from a covenantal perspective.
- *The Gospel According to Mark*, James R. Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, Eerdmans, 2002. This is an exceptional commentary, which I found to be one of the most helpful in this study.
- *The Gospel of Mark*, R. T. France, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, Eerdmans/Paternoster, 2002. This is an exegetical and extremely detailed commentary, and a good reference volume.
- *Mark, The NIV Application Commentary*, David E. Garland, Zonderan. Easy to use with good ideas for application, as the series title suggests.
- *The Gospel of Mark*, William Hendriksen, Baker Books, 1975. A workhorse type of commentary, reliable, reflecting biblical fidelity, solid exegesis written as an "efficient and working tool, even for laymen."
- *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, William L. Lane, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, 1974. Exegetical, reflects good scholarship, definite commitment to textual faithfulness and quite usable.