The Gospel According to Mark

Why do we have four gospels? Is it four gospels, or is it one Gospel told four ways? It is one Gospel with four witnesses, so that is why the church calls them “The Gospel according to Matthew” and “the Gospel according to Mark,” etc. Why do we have four? For one thing, Deuteronomy tells us that we need more than one witness to establish the truth of a matter. There are different audiences as well. The congregation of a church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, is probably different from a congregation in Sydney, Australia. They have different problems and different challenges. They live in a different economy. Because of these differences, it is appropriate to speak to them about their life of faith in different ways. When preaching to different audiences in different regions of the U. S. or in different parts of the world, I have chosen to focus on different aspects of Jesus’ life—different events and sayings—because they are more relevant to that particular audience at that particular time and place.

What we see between the evangelists is that they choose Jesus of Nazareth and his first followers as their subjects. Yet, they depict them a little bit differently. Jesus is recognizably the same person, so that is why we see some of the same stories. Indeed, all four of the Gospels focus very clearly on the passion event, so the death and the resurrection of Jesus is prominent. What happens in all four of the Gospels is that you have a fairly rapid pace of narration until you come to Easter week. In the last third of the Gospels, narrative time slows down. That is because the authors emphasize something by the way they end the story and by the fact that they slow down the time. They take much more time to talk about Easter week, because it is so important for understanding Jesus’ mission. The passion of Jesus is a very important part of understanding Mark’s Christology.

John Mark was probably Peter’s interpreter. Papias, Iraenaus, and Clement all tell us that Mark’s Gospel is based on Peter’s witness. Turn to 1 Peter 5 for a moment. This is Peter’s first letter. Notice what he says in his final greetings in 1 Peter 5:13: “She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark.” We see that 1 Peter 5:13 places Peter and Mark in Rome together. I want to draw your attention to Acts 10:34-43. Here we have Luke’s account of Peter’s sermon:

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

There you have a summary of Mark’s Gospel. Notice where Peter began. He did not begin in the same place as Matthew or Luke. He did not begin with the birth of Jesus; he began with Galilee and the baptism. That is how he tells the story. Mark’s Gospel also begins with the baptism and with Jesus in Galilee. The focus of Peter’s sermon is that Jesus frees those who are under the influence of the devil, and one of Mark’s clear emphases is Jesus’ ministry to those who are demon-possessed. It seems to be
something that Peter wanted to emphasize as well in Acts 10. So we see a correspondence between Luke’s account of Peter’s narration of the Gospel in Acts 10 and the basic outline of Mark’s Gospel. We see confirmation in the New Testament of what the church fathers tell us.

What about Mark’s audience? Unlike Matthew, Mark explains Jewish customs. Notice that, while Mark explains Jewish customs, he leaves several unexplained Latinisms. Turn to Mark 5:9. Here we have the term “legion,” which is a Latin term that Mark does not translate. He does not tell his audience what it means. In chapter 12:42, we have very specific terms for Roman coins—the lepton, the smallest coin in circulation, and the quadrans, a Roman coin worth about 1/64 of a day’s wage, which was a denarius. So the lepton and the quadrans are Roman terms that he does not explain. Then in Mark 15:21 we see something interesting. It is not certain, but it is rather intriguing. In Mark 15:21, we read that “a certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way from the country. And they forced him to carry the cross of Jesus.” Now why would Mark include the names of these sons of Simon? Why would he explain that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus unless someone in his audience knew who Alexander and Rufus were? Turn now to Romans 16 and look at the greetings at the end of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Remember that he wrote to Rome. What is interesting is that there were already Christians in Rome. We know that Peter was there and that he ministered there with Mark. The church in Rome probably had its origins in the dispersion after Pentecost and Peter’s ministry there as well as the ministries of Priscilla and Aquila and Paul. It says in Romans 16:13, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.” It is possible that this is the same Rufus mentioned in Mark’s Gospel. Why mention that Simon is the father of Rufus, unless perhaps people in the congregations in the house churches of Rome know who Rufus is? Perhaps Mark was making that connection for them.

We have lots of indicators that Mark’s audience is comprised primarily of Gentile Christians—probably Gentile Christians in the Roman house churches. It is people to whom Mark would have to explain Jewish customs. Turn to Mark 7. In biblical narrative—certainly it is very important in Mark’s Gospel—there is something called the “narrator’s evaluative point of view.” In biblical storytelling, unlike modern or postmodern fiction, the narrator is reliable. It is more like the way that history is told in the Old Testament. Biblical history is written by a reliable narrator. What is interesting in Mark 7 is that the narrator’s voice intrudes several times, describing the setting and the action. Then we have these explanatory asides about Jewish custom, introducing dialogue, and then at the end we have an evaluative summary. Let us look at Mark 7 together.

“The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were ‘unclean’”—this is the same word that is translated “evil” in Mark 1—“that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)” In those verses, Mark is explaining Jewish customs to his audience. Now let me just move down to the evaluative summary in verse 19. We are dealing with the issue of being clean and unclean, in terms of washing your hands before you eat. The Pharisees say, “Why do your disciples not follow the traditions of the elders?” Jesus quotes from Isaiah 29, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain. Their teachings are but rules taught by men.” That is an advancement of what we saw before with the comparison of the teachers of the law. Jesus has more authority than they. Then He goes on to talk about this business of the corban and how it sets aside God’s command to honor one’s parents. In verse 19, then, at the end of this, Jesus says, “‘Do you not see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him “unclean”? For it does not go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.’ (In
saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean.’)” The narrator’s evaluative commentary says it all. We must follow the narrator’s guidance. Mark’s narrator explains how Jesus made all foods clean, and that opens the door for all these Gentiles to be included in the new covenant community as Gentiles.

Mark also focuses on Galilee more than the other Gospel writers. Galilee, as you know from Isaiah, is “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Mark describes five episodes in Galilee, then seven episodes in Jerusalem, but Mark does give more time to Galilee than do the other Gospel writers. One of the things that Mark likes to do is a two-step progression. He will introduce something, and then he will go to something else that will help you understand the first thing. We see a good example of this in the story of Jairus’ daughter. Turn to chapter 5. Notice what we see here. I will begin reading in verse 21.

When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.” So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

Now we have to wait to find out about Jairus’ daughter. We got sidetracked with something else. What is the something else? What kind of expectation does it create in you? The story of the hemorrhaging woman foreshadows for us that Jairus’ daughter will be okay. The second story creates a sense of where the first one is going. There is two-step storytelling. I will continue reading in verse 30.

At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” “You see the people crowding against you,” his disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’” But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.” While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?” Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, “Do not be afraid; just believe.” He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of Jairus, the synagogue ruler, “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?” Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, “Do not be afraid; just believe.” He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of Jairus, the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha koum!” (which means, “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Mark does not focus nearly as much as Matthew does on Jesus’ teaching. Mark focuses on Jesus’ deeds. For Mark, Jesus is a man of action. Jesus does a lot of talking in Matthew’s Gospel. But, in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus goes from place to place, and immediately He does something else, then immediately something else happens. It is all very fast-paced. There is constant motion in Mark’s Gospel. This is the
action-adventure version of the Gospel. Notice where Mark begins. Do you remember what I told you about the narrator’s evaluative point of view? We, as the readers of this Gospel, are let in on something very important right at the beginning. Mark introduces his Gospel in this way: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Nobody in the story hears this. The narrator is just telling us. He gives us an insight at the very beginning.

Then Mark starts talking about Isaiah the prophet and about John the Baptist baptizing Jesus. We hear this voice: “You are my Son.” And now notice what happens. We have seen it a couple of times already. Jesus prohibits those whom he has healed from saying anything. Do you remember what he said to the demons in chapter 1? We saw this in verses 23 and 25. Look at verse 34. It says, “He healed many people with various diseases, he drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak, because they knew who He was.”

The Son of God in Mark

What does the phrase “Son of God” mean in a Gentile context? We talked about the phrase in the context of Matthew. In Matthew, “Son of God” means the Davidic king, who is not necessarily a divine figure. However, on the coins of Caesar Augustus was inscribed the phrase divi filius, or “son of God.”

It is interesting that in a broader Greco-Roman world, this phrase involves a claim to divinity and a claim to power. What is interesting, though, is that the people in the story do not necessarily recognize this. Readers in the Roman house church, however, would recognize that Jesus is being called the same thing that Caesar is called—Son of God, powerful man, son of the divine. However, there is a very, very important difference between Caesar and Jesus. There is a great difference between the kind of leadership and divinity and life mission that Jesus has over against the kind of power and authority Caesar claimed. Notice Jesus’ warnings to His disciples. Look in chapter 8. We come to a turning point in Mark’s Gospel in chapter 8, verses 27-30. This is a famous passage. “Jesus and his disciples went to the villages around Caesarea Philippi”—Peter’s hometown—“and on the way he asked them, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.’ ‘But what about you? Who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ.’ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.”

Here is this theme again in Mark’s Gospel. Some call it the “Messianic secret.” The idea is that until it is time, Jesus makes certain prohibitions about who can say what about who he is. “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and must be killed after three days and rise again.” He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside to rebuke him. Those who follow this Son of God must leave everything and follow after Him in His suffering. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is going to the cross, and so what is interesting is that what it means to be the Son of God is very odd. It is very strange to those who associate “Son of God” with Caesar and with ultimate power. We see this Messianic secret unfolding in the Gospel. Three times we have what are called the passion predictions. We just read one in Mark 8:31. We see it again in Mark 9:31, “Because he was teaching his disciples, he said, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise.’ They did not understand what he meant, and they were afraid to ask him about it.”

Interestingly, earlier, in chapter 4, we read the parable of the soils, one of the rare parables that we have in Mark’s Gospel. In Mark’s Gospel in particular, there is a focus on parables being spoken in riddles. Parables are spoken to prevent understanding from those who are outside, from those who only want to use Jesus for their own purposes. There is only one way that you can really know the truth about Jesus. You have to go with Him. It is not an academic exercise. It is not a political movement. There is only
one way that you can know this man, and it is to go with Him into suffering, to follow Him to the cross. We see this again in Mark 10:33. The disciples are on their way to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way. The disciples are astonished. Those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside and said what was going to happen: “We are going to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him. Three days later, he will rise.”

How does this so-called Messianic secret function in Mark’s Gospel? Many scholars think that it is just there to obscure something. However, I think that Dr. Kingsbury is most helpful here, because he notices something really important. He notices the role of the narrator’s evaluative point of view. Right at the beginning we are told that Jesus is the Son of God. Though Jesus tells people in the story to keep the secret about who He really is, His identity is nevertheless revealed. The way that comes to be revealed is not just in His confrontations with demons, in His healings, or in His mighty actions, but also, most clearly in His passion, in His death and resurrection. So this frame comes full-circle, then, in Mark 15:39. At the end of Mark’s Gospel we see Jesus on the cross, and out of the mouth of a Roman centurion who was there and saw how Jesus died, come these astonishing words: “‘Surely this man was the son of God.’” So what begins by letting the readers in on a secret is kept quiet in the Gospel. It is even obscured to people who do not really want to know or just want to know enough to use Jesus. Those who really want to know have to stay with Him. They have to come close to Him. They have to follow closely, and that means identifying with Him so much as to follow Him to the cross. Sure enough, what does the Son of God look like? Mark 10 sums up very clearly the contrast between Caesar, the Son of God and Jesus, the Son of God. I will read from Mark 10, beginning in verse 41: “When the ten heard about this”—this request from the mother of James and John that they will rule with Jesus—“they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and he said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. Their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must become a servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’”

The Purpose and Ending of Mark’s Gospel

So the purpose of Mark’s Gospel is to display the authority of the kingdom of God over evil by presenting the good news of Jesus to a predominantly Gentile audience through the authoritative witness of His apostles. Yes, it is about authority, but it is authority expressed in the service that led Jesus to the cross. So we have the beginning of the good news about the Son of God, then the ministry of God’s Son in Galilee of the Gentiles, through chapter 9, and then the power of God’s Son over enemies and death in Jerusalem.

Now we need to say one more thing about the ending of Mark’s Gospel, because there are lots of different versions to the ending of Mark’s Gospel. If we look in chapter 16, notice right here in verse 6. We have Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bringing spices, and a young man dressed in a white robe says, “Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee, and there you will see him, just as he told you.’ Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

Now that is what is called the “short ending” of Mark’s Gospel. Then we have two other versions of the ending. We have verses 9-20, encompassing the other two. “When Jesus rose early on the first day of the
week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and
told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus
was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.”

What is interesting here in the focus on Mary Magdalene is the contrast with John and the way John’s
Gospel ends in John 20:11-18. Jesus appears to Mary. The ending of John’s Gospel focuses on the
appearance to Mary. It goes on even longer there. Then look at Mark 16:12-14: “Afterward Jesus
appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and
reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they
were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had
seen him after he had risen.” Now what does that sound like? There are two on the road, Jesus meets
them, and then later they go to the Eleven. That is the way that Luke’s Gospel ends. Two disciples are
on the road to Emmaus, and then after Jesus appears to them, He comes into the midst of the eleven. We
will keep reading in Mark 16:15 and following:

He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever
believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And
these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will
speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly
poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get
well.” After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the
right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked
with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.

Now the “go into all the world” sounds just like Matthew. The whole business about picking up snakes
and not getting bitten and speaking with new tongues sounds like Acts. So what we probably have here
is that verses 9-20 were added later to incorporate the endings of the other Gospels so that Mark’s
Gospel would end in the same way that the other Gospels end. What makes the most sense to me is that
the original text ended at verse 8. They were so afraid. They were supposed to go into Galilee. Galilee is
an emphasis for Mark. Jesus says that same thing in Luke, but He has them stay first in Jerusalem. It
works out a little differently, so I think that recognizing where these elements come from explains why
they are here. Someone later wanted to make Mark’s Gospel conform to the other Gospels.

We have made a start. We have covered a lot of ground so far. We have set the stage of the environment
of the Mediterranean basin in the first century. We have begun to look at the New Testament, and it is
great to do this together, and I look forward to our next lesson. Let us pray together.

Lord, thank You again for your Word and for Your goodness to us. I thank you for my brothers and
sisters, and I pray, Lord, that You will bless them, and that You would keep their families safe. Keep us
healthy, we pray. Bless our studies, for we ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.