

# JESUS

## Portraits from the Gospels

KENNETH SCHENCK



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To David Bauer and David Thompson,  
my professors for Inductive Bible Study at Asbury Seminary.  
They taught me how to listen to what Scripture wanted to  
say to me rather than to tell it what I wanted it to say.

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# 1

## MARK'S BASIC STORY

### THE BIG PICTURE

This is the second of two books on Jesus. The first volume, *Jesus—The Mission*, aimed to give an overview of Jesus' mission while he was on earth, the basics. It focused on the core features of his ministry and attempted to answer this question: What elements do the Gospels have in common, especially the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke?

This second volume is interested in the unique themes of each individual gospel, the specific contributions each gospel makes to our understanding of Jesus. It seeks to answer these questions: How is each gospel different from the others, and where does each likely fit in the history of the early church? Did the gospel writers know about the other gospels and, if so, did they interact with what the others had written?

A good place to start, though, is to summarize the core features of Jesus' earthly mission from the previous volume. Jesus was on earth from around 6 B.C. to A.D. 30. He was born in Bethlehem south of Jerusalem and grew up in Galilee about a three-days' journey north of Jerusalem, not far from the Sea of Galilee. Augustus was the Roman emperor when Jesus was born, and Herod the Great ruled all the land of Israel as a king under Augustus. Tiberius was emperor when they crucified Jesus under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

Jesus' ministry began near the end of the A.D. 20s. At that time, Israel was divided with different rulers. A Roman governor ruled in the south, in Judea where Jerusalem was. In the northwest, where Galilee was, a son of Herod the Great—Herod Antipas—ruled not as a king but as a tetrarch, the “ruler of a fourth.” It was this Herod who beheaded John the Baptist.

Jesus' mission really took off after Herod arrested John “the baptizer.” Jesus had traveled down to the south, to the Jordan River, and was baptized by John. John was likely preaching that God was coming both to judge the world and to reestablish his kingdom on earth. In preparation, John called the people to repent of their sins against Israel's covenant with God and wash themselves in the Jordan through baptism.

The fact that Jesus submitted to this baptism shows that he must have substantially agreed with John's message. But while John's message focused on something that was coming, including the coming of the Messiah, Jesus' message focused on the arrival of the kingdom. Jesus appointed twelve key disciples, or followers, symbolizing the restoration of Israel. While he was not very open about it publicly, he eventually made it clear to his

disciples that he was going to be the king of the kingdom that was arriving in his ministry.

The cornerstone of Jesus' preaching and teaching was thus the kingdom of God that was starting in his ministry but would not fully arrive until some time that only God the Father knows. He taught primarily in parables, stories that clarified the truth for some but were riddles for others. The kingdom was to be for everyone, so he especially targeted the "lost sheep," those like the poor and widows, who the powerful ignored or, worse, abused.

He healed the sick—more people who were disempowered. He cast out demons, cleaning the spiritual house of Israel in preparation for the coming rule of God on earth as it is in heaven. He trained his key followers to carry out the mission first everywhere in Israel but, as it would turn out, eventually in the whole world. He taught them the core principle of loving your neighbor as yourself.

Lastly, Jesus died and rose again from the dead. While many Christians focus almost exclusively on Jesus' death, this was not the focus of his time on earth. We have good reason to believe that his death generally took his disciples by surprise. Similarly, his resurrection seemed to take them by surprise as well. It's a reminder to us that we have much more to gain from Jesus than simply his death and resurrection. We have much to gain from his life as well.

The rest of this chapter continues to review the overall thrust of Jesus' earthly ministry but from a slightly different perspective. What you will find as you move through this book is that the gospel of Mark was a primary source behind Matthew and Luke. These three gospels are called the Synoptic Gospels because they are similar enough to look at side by side.

To start, then, let's look at the core story of Jesus in the gospel of Mark. All but about thirty-one verses of Mark is also found in Matthew or Luke. That fact makes Mark an excellent place to begin discussing Matthew and Luke as well.

## MARK'S OUTLINE

The gospel of Mark divides nicely into two parts. The first part is upbeat and culminates with Peter's acknowledgment that Jesus is the Messiah (1:1—8:30). Jesus was healing and casting out demons. He was performing miracles and teaching. He was getting into conflict, but his opponents hardly provided any challenge.

The second part begins with a turning point (8:31—15:47). For the first time, Jesus was identified as the Messiah by another human being (8:29). Then he told them he was going to Jerusalem to die, the theme that dominates the second half of the book. There is a sense of foreboding, of inevitability, that climaxes in Jesus' crucifixion and the centurion confessing that Jesus is the Son of God (15:39).

Then what we have of Mark 16 is an epilogue where Jesus' resurrection is announced. Most experts on the text of Mark do not think the verses after 16:8 were originally part of Mark. Among these experts, some think Mark originally ended at 16:8. Others, like me, suspect that the original ending was lost at an early date, maybe even before Matthew was written. If so, we can imagine that those verses went on to tell about Jesus appearing to Peter and the other disciples in Galilee (Mark 16:7).





## MANUSCRIPTS OF THE BIBLE

When the New International Version came out in 1984, the King James Version was still king indeed in conservative circles. So imagine the surprise when NIV readers came to Mark 16:9 and found this comment: “The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9–20”! It felt like someone was trying to cut something out of the Bible, especially for those who had grown up all their lives hearing sermons from those verses.

You don't have to accept what most experts think. There are even some people who have given years to studying the issues just to show they can argue that those verses actually were original. But it's important to know what exactly is being said by the conservative scholars who translated versions like the NIV.

We don't have any of the first editions of the books of the Bible. All we have are copies. In the vast majority of instances, we have copies of copies of copies . . . of copies of copies. Although the vast majority of the variations among these copies are completely insignificant, there are some famous differences, one of which is the “longer ending” of Mark.

The translators of the NIV believed that the very first edition of Mark, the one Mark himself created, did not

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have those verses in it. They came to this conclusion because the earliest copies of Mark don't have these verses and several early Christians say they weren't in many copies of Mark. The idea is that someone added Mark 16:9–20 later, because otherwise Mark seemed to end too abruptly. In fact, some wonder whether there was another ending originally that was lost very early on.

So the reason almost all contemporary translations of the Bible do not have these verses is because scholars think they are not original. The NIV translators didn't think they were taking verses out of the Bible. They thought the verses in the King James were added in.

There is something to take away from this issue. Apparently, the message was far more important to God than the precise wording of the Bible. Indeed, if the precise wording was really important, we should all learn Greek and Hebrew and not use an English translation at all. This issue helps us catch a glimpse of God's priorities. He's interested in the spirit and not so much the letter.

So the gospel of Mark has a fairly discernible overall structure to it. It's much harder to tell where, if anywhere, the story should be broken down within these two halves. We can divide it in a way that seems good to us—by geography, for example. However, many times when we do this sort of thing—like create an outline based on the ideas *we* see in a book—it says a lot more

about us than about the text itself. A good outline looks for clear clues in the wording of the book (words like *therefore* or phrases like *after these things*).

When the early Christian Papias described Mark, he suggested that Mark did not put down the events of Jesus' ministry in order.<sup>1</sup> Papias may have had his own reasons for saying such a thing, but it fits with the impression we get from Mark.<sup>2</sup> There are collections of material that go together—for example, the controversies of Mark 2 or the final events of Jesus' last week. But the overwhelming majority of Mark is simply paragraph after paragraph strung together with the word *and*.<sup>3</sup>

And we should remember that Mark is technically anonymous. Nowhere in the text of Mark itself does the author give his name.<sup>4</sup> Papias, writing at the beginning of the A.D. 100s points to a Mark as its author, presumably the Mark of 1 Peter 5:13 (compare the John Mark of Acts 12:12). This is such an early tradition that we need to take it seriously. Mark was not an eyewitness to Jesus, but he apparently drew much of his material from Peter's preaching.<sup>5</sup>

However, if we really want to hear the gospel of Mark, we will not bring in any of the information from the last paragraph until after we have already listened carefully to what the text says. One of the biggest challenges to the way Christians read the Bible today is that we don't listen to the Bible, but see ourselves in its words like a mirror. We inadvertently miss its clues because we are so certain what it must say John Mark may have written it, but we shouldn't take him into consideration until after we've let the text itself have its say.

## MARK, PART 1

Mark 1:1 begins with a simple enough statement: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah.” The NIV 2011 translates the opening verse well, for a couple reasons. First, the phrase “good news” is better than “gospel” because it would be easy for us to think that Mark is only saying that this verse was the beginning of the *gospel* of Mark. But when Mark wrote, the idea of a gospel book hadn’t happened yet.

It may very well be that the idea of a gospel book started with the way Mark worded this verse: “the beginning of the gospel.” Mark meant the beginning of the *good news*, but it’s easy enough to see how some later reader would think of the whole book as a gospel, a new type of literature or genre. If an ancient person had found a scroll of Mark on the street and picked it up, no doubt he or she would have thought of it as some kind of biography. There is no birth story. This might have seemed as odd to an ancient person as it does to us. How do you have a biography without a birth story?

Then again, we look for different things in the childhood of a famous person than the ancients did. We live in the shadow of Freud, where we want to know the “formative influences” on a child. How did his parents treat him? What kind of a relationship did she have with her mother? The ancients saw identity in much more fatalistic terms. If the child later became great, there must have been signs of greatness from the beginning. Were there notable omens at the time of birth? What early indications were there of the later greatness?

Mark simply begins with Jesus’ baptism by John. The author hits the ground running in this compact, first gospel. Later in this

book, I'll give some reasons why most think Mark was the first of the Gospels we now have. We can speculate that some of the traditions about Jesus were written down before Mark, but Mark is the earliest we have for sure.

The good news is about Jesus, the Messiah. The NIV 2011 goes with the Hebrew version of the word *Christ*. Messiah means “anointed one” and has clear connotations of Jesus’ kingship. Christ is simply the Greek translation of it. Many manuscripts also have “Son of God” here, which is also a royal title that comes from the Old Testament (see Ps. 2; 2 Sam. 7:14).

The first thirteen verses of Mark set the stage for Jesus’ ministry. We meet John the Baptist, and Jesus was baptized by John. Then Jesus was driven to the desert, where he was tempted in preparation for his mission.

Verses 1:14–15 arguably give us the key verses of Mark. This begins the first half of the gospel in earnest (1:14—8:30). What did Jesus preach? He preached that the kingdom of God was arriving. The climax of this section is arguably in 8:27–30, where Peter acknowledged for the first time that Jesus himself is the Christ, the earthly king of the kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

So we have the announcement of the kingdom at the beginning of this section, but the disciples did not yet fully know Jesus’ role in that kingdom. He was simply its chief proponent after John the Baptist was arrested. But by the end of the section, they acknowledged that he was the Christ of that kingdom.

Jesus did several different kinds of things in the intervening verses. He recruited and trained followers. In Mark, recruiting Peter, Andrew, James, and John was the first thing he did after he started preaching the kingdom (1:16–20).<sup>7</sup> Later, he would call a tax collector named Levi (2:13–17).<sup>8</sup> Still later, Jesus’

followers would coalesce into a group of twelve key individuals (3:13–19), probably symbolizing the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. Then Jesus sent them out to preach just as he did (6:6–13).

These twelve only scratched the surface of those who followed Jesus in Galilee. The story of Jesus feeding five thousand people on one day alone points to a much larger group of Jesus followers. The early church understood these twelve to be unique in a way that none since have been or could be (see Acts 1:25; 1 Cor. 15:5). And while Paul understood himself and others to be apostles as well, witnesses to the resurrection (1 Cor. 9:1), he also likely understood himself to be the last of this group (15:8).

Nevertheless, the Great Commission tells us that making disciples of Jesus didn't stop here. Jesus sent his disciples to go make other disciples. In Mark 6, Jesus sent out his disciples to assist in throwing demons out of power and in preparing people for the arrival of God's kingdom. In Matthew 28, his core followers were to teach his commandments to all the nations and to baptize them.

In recent times, we have tended to limit the Great Commission to convincing others to become Christians, but there is nothing so narrow in Matthew 28. Becoming a follower of Jesus in Matthew is more than getting baptized. It is even more than a process of learning Jesus' teachings. Becoming a follower of Jesus in Matthew means taking on Jesus' yoke (Matt. 11:28–30). It involves being willing to be persecuted, even crucified, because of following Jesus (Matt. 10:38).

A second thing Jesus did was cast out demons. When Jesus did so, he was doing something much bigger than just helping one person out, although Jesus' exorcist ministry was a clear

example of his compassion toward others. Rather, many Jews at the time believed the earthly realm had been under the control of demonic forces since the earliest days of humanity. Therefore, when Jesus cast out demons, he was reclaiming the earth for God—the rule of God was returning to the land once more (compare Luke 11:20). And he sent his own followers out to participate in this sign of God's approaching kingdom.

Certainly Jesus healed many people in the first half of Mark, perhaps the most obvious example of his compassion. He healed Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31).<sup>9</sup> He healed a leper (1:40–45) and a paralytic (2:1–12). He healed a man with a disabled hand (3:1–6) and someone who couldn't speak or hear (7:32–37). He healed a woman with a hemorrhage (5:35–43) and even raised a girl from the dead (5:25–34).

Some of the miracles he did transcended human healing. On one occasion, he multiplied food to feed five thousand (6:33–44) and then another four thousand (8:1–9). He calmed the sea (4:35–41) and walked on water (6:47–53). These events speak of a power from God that we would call *supernatural* today, transcending the laws of nature.

Jesus prayed. Mark gives us only two verses on Jesus' temptation in the desert (1:12–13) but tells us elsewhere that Jesus sought out deserted places to pray (1:35). He increasingly found it difficult to get alone for such things. If it wasn't the crowds seeking him out, then it was his followers seeking him out for the crowds. We can presume that this time alone with God not only recharged Jesus, but also clarified for him his sense of God's will.

It is easy for us to forget that Jesus fully participated in humanity. He suspended his knowledge of all things while he was on earth (see Mark 13:32). Even though we believe he was

God, on earth he had to learn who he was, and he had to learn God's will, just as we do.

Jesus taught, and he taught primarily in stories and riddles. The primary example Mark gives us is Jesus' parable of the soils in Mark 4. A farmer threw seed on four different kinds of soil: the path, rocky soil, soil where there were weeds, and good soil. Birds snatched the first. The second had no root and so was scorched by the sun. The third was choked by weeds, and only the seed on the fourth soil thrived. Jesus' point was that not everyone will respond appropriately to news of the kingdom. Only the one who "has ears to hear" will hear and follow (4:9). Ironically, Jesus' own followers didn't understand this riddle, a fact to which we will return in the next chapter. Jesus' own disciples didn't understand the parable whose point is that only those with faith will understand his riddles!

Inevitably, Jesus experienced conflict. He didn't go looking for it; it came looking for him. When you are making as big an impact as Jesus was, some people are going to feel threatened. They're going to get jealous. Some are just going to flat out disagree with you. Jesus had his share of that, and eventually it grew so great that they put him to death.

## MARK, PART 2

The turning point of Mark, as is often said, comes after Jesus acknowledged to Peter that he was (and is) the Christ, the expected, anointed one of Israel (Mark 8:27–30). The tone and direction of Mark changes from that point on. Up to this point, everything has been "Go, go, go!" Jesus healed,



cast out demons, and was followed by crowds of immense proportions.

But now the tone changes. Three times Jesus would tell his disciples he was going to Jerusalem to die. There is a sense of foreboding and destiny. Although Jesus still healed and the crowds still followed, he spent more time privately with his key followers.

Mark 9 records the curious event of the transfiguration, where Peter, James, John saw Elijah and Moses appear with Jesus. They would emerge as a core group of disciples within the larger group of the Twelve, even after the resurrection. Unfortunately, James and John seem to have wanted such privileged roles. They argued with the other disciples over their desire to have the highest roles in the coming kingdom (10:35–40).

At another point, the whole group of disciples was arguing over who would be the greatest when the kingdom arrived (9:34). They must have thought they were going to Jerusalem for Jesus to become king, not to die. We will return to the disciples' lack of understanding, a key theme of Mark, in the next chapter.

In Mark 10, Jesus and his disciples left for Jerusalem. There was a little more teaching (on divorce in Mark 10). He healed a blind man named Bartimaeus as they left Jericho, just a few miles east of Jerusalem. But his goal was Jerusalem.

Finally we arrive at Mark 11–15, Passion Week, the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry. Almost a third of the entire gospel of Mark focuses on Jesus' last week on earth. Surely this means his death and resurrection are the most important events in the gospel.

We know more about this week of Jesus' time on earth than any other. The week began on what we now call Palm Sunday. Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey, imitating

Zechariah 9:9 and implying that he was the coming king of Israel. In Mark, Jesus went to the temple on Monday morning and overturned the tables of those exchanging money and selling animals for sacrifice.

Uniquely among the Gospels, Mark frames Jesus' action in the temple with Jesus cursing a fig tree because it had no fruit. After he protested the injustice of the temple, his disciples later discovered that the fig tree had withered. Although our first impression might be to wonder why Jesus would get so upset with a tree, Mark probably means us to see a similarity between the fig tree and the leadership of Israel. Just as the fig tree had not yielded fruit and was destroyed, so Jerusalem was facing eventual judgment and the temple would be destroyed.

As we will explore more fully in the next chapter, the climax of Mark is Jesus' death on the cross and the realization of a soldier nearby that Jesus must surely be the Son of God. This would have been a shocking claim at the time. Mark boldly implies that Jesus is not only Messiah *despite* the fact that he died on the cross, but Jesus is Messiah precisely *because* he died on the cross to be a "ransom" for the sins of many.

The resurrection is thus more of an epilogue in Mark in the way it is told, rather than its climax as in the other Gospels. But Mark clearly states that Jesus rose from the dead. Even though the last verses (16:9–20) probably were added later, don't let anyone tell you that Mark doesn't teach the resurrection. The young man at the tomb clearly proclaimed that Jesus is alive, and we are supposed to think that Jesus went on to appear to the disciples in Galilee.

As I reflect on the basic story of Jesus in Mark, a few things jump out at me. The first is how insignificant a place it was where God chose to come to earth. I don't mean just that the earth is a

tiny speck in a tiny solar system in just one galaxy in a massive universe. I mean even on this planet Earth.

Jesus did not come as part of some world empire. He did not come as Alexander the Great or some Roman emperor. He came to a small subjugated group on the edge of the “civilized” world. Even then, he did not come to Jerusalem, the city of the great king David. He did not come as a priestly leader in the temple. He came to backwater Galilee as a hillbilly, so to speak.

Even in Galilee, he moved in insignificant villages within an insignificant region, places like Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin. The Sea of Galilee is no great lake, only about thirteen miles at its longest point. It looks like a puddle next to something the size of Lake Michigan. “Really,” they asked, “the Messiah comes from Galilee?”

It makes me think of the hymn in Philippians 2 that talks about how even though Jesus had a divine status he emptied himself and took the status of a servant. It shows humility. Jesus didn't have this lowly status because he couldn't help it. He *chose* this status. Even though he had immeasurable power, he chose to be insignificant, to identify with the least of us.

How many of us fight with all our being to gain every drop of status we can get, every drop of power we can get? Some of us are very clever at disguising selfish ambition as being on a mission for God. As a sign of how twisted human nature is, some in the past even made looking plain or not wearing jewelry into a matter of pride. In effect they were saying, “Exalt me because of how humble I am.”

But Jesus didn't care whether the important people of the world noticed him. He healed and asked them not to talk about it. He cast out demons and silenced them. What self-confidence

not to need acclaim for the great things you do because you are so focused on God rather than yourself!

A second thing that stands out to me is the fact that Jesus was so interested in the lives of the insignificant. He not only became insignificant but he paid attention to those everyone else ignored. The leper society cast out and thrust beyond reach—Jesus noticed and healed. He did not come for the righteous. He did not come for the healthy. He came for the sick and for sinners who weren't even trying to follow God.

And what was it that made Jesus angry? It wasn't when people broke the rules. It was when people didn't help others or, worse, hurt others. Jesus became angry in the temple because the leadership of Israel was hurting the little people. He would spar with religious leaders because they paid a lot of attention to minor details on how to keep the law while missing the big picture of those in need.

Most importantly, Jesus was willing to die for his people. He was willing to die for Israel to be reconciled to God. And we as Christians believe he was willing to die for the sins of the whole world, potentially for everyone who has ever lived in this world from the beginning of time.

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Is there anything in this chapter that you had never heard before? Is there anything you found surprising? Is there anything you disagree with?
2. Had you ever heard about the final verses of Mark before? Do you understand the issue—that we don't have the original

editions of the books of the Bible and that the different copies we have sometimes say different things? Which side do you prefer to take on the ending of Mark and which side do you think is probably correct? Do you agree that God is more interested in the message than the precise wording?

3. Why do you think God came to earth to such an insignificant place? What do you think it tells us about God's priorities?

4. Look at your own life. Do you have the priorities Jesus seems to have had while he was on earth? Do you get angry about the kinds of things that made Jesus angry?