

The Gospel of Mark: HE CAME TO SERVE

by Ray C. Stedman

The Gospel of Mark, the second book in the New Testament, is 16 short chapters long, the briefest of all the Gospels, and therefore easy to read in one sitting. Its brevity is probably the reason it is the most often translated book of the New Testament. The Wycliffe translators, I understand, almost invariably begin their translation work with the Gospel of Mark because it is so short and gives the whole story in one brief compass.

This Gospel has a completely different atmosphere from the Gospel of Matthew. If you go on to read Luke and John, you will see that they are still different from Matthew and Mark, Matthew, Mark and Luke are more similar to each other than any of these three are to the Gospel of John. Nevertheless, they are all different.

There is a reason for this, designed deliberately by the Holy Spirit. We make a mistake if we think these four Gospels are four biographies of the Lord. They are not biographies at all, they are character sketches, intended to be different, intended to present different points of view. Therefore, they constitute four distinct views of our Lord and of his work.

The Gospel of Matthew is written to present Christ as the King. The Gospel of Mark presents his character as a servant. The Gospel of Luke presents him as the Son of man -- as man in his essential humanity. The Gospel of John presents him as the Son of God, that is, his deity, and there you find the greatest claims for his deity.

Someone has pointed out that the very clothes our Lord wore indicate this. His robe is the mark of a king, because in those days the king wore a robe, as kings do even today. The towel that he girded about himself as he washed the disciples' feet at the Lord's supper is the mark of a servant. The fact that his robe was seamless is a mark of his humanity -- perfect, without flaw, without seams -- not the joining together of two things, but a perfect, unbroken humanity. The fact that on the Mount of Transfiguration it became a shining garment is a mark of his Godhood -- his deity -- the Glory of God enshrined in a human temple, so that John could write of him, "we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father," {John 1:14 RSV}. He came and tabernacled among us. Yet within that human tent, the glory of God shone forth.

It is also noteworthy that the recipients of these Gospels were quite different. Matthew wrote his Gospel primarily for the Jews, and it is filled with references and quotations from the Old Testament. There you have the fulfillment of the sacrificial feast with which the Jews were so familiar. But Mark writes his Gospel for the Roman mind. This is the Gospel that has the most Latin words in it -- the Gospel of haste and action, characteristics of Rome.

Luke writes for the Greek mind, the philosophical mind. Here you have our Lord's table talk, as he sat with his disciples in intimate fellowship -- the Greeks loved this. His discourses are here, his philosophical utterances, the representation of his thoughts and wisdom as a man. But John writes for the Christian, and therefore, the Gospel of John is dearest to Christian hearts. There you have the deity of Christ emphasized. There you have the teaching of the rapture of the Church first brought out. The hope of the Church and the intimacy of the fellowship of communion between the Lord and his own, the Holy Spirit's ministry, are all emphasized in the Gospel of John. So there are four distinct purposes for writing these Gospels.

This is true of the work of Christ as well. There are four aspects of the cross. If you are familiar with the teaching of the Old Testament about the feasts of Israel, you will remember that five feasts were especially marked out for them, and these are reflected in the Gospels. One of the five, the sin offering, is reflected in the Gospel of Matthew, where you have the sacrifice of our Lord and its effect upon human sin. Then in Mark the trespass offering is emphasized; that is, the effects of sin, the manifestation of it, the deeds of men. In Luke you have what answers to the peace offering.

The burnt offering is in John. To Israel, the burnt offering was the expression of utter and complete dedication

and devotion, commitment to the work of God. All of the burnt offering had to be consumed, every bit of it. None of it was eaten by the priest. All of it speaks of a life totally given to God. This is exemplified so beautifully in the Gospel of John, where you have the devotion of our Lord, how he pleased the Father. All four of these speak of the meal offering, that is, the perfect humanity of our Lord, sinless being that he was.

Now, if you know these things about the Gospels, it will explain certain questions that are sometimes asked. For instance, why is there no account of the struggle of our Lord in Gethsemane in the Gospel of John? You find the record of Gethsemane's agony in Matthew and Mark, but no mention of it is in John. It is because in the garden he cried out and questioned the Father, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me," {Matt 26:39 RSV, cf, Mark 14:34-35}. Now, the Son of God does not question the Father, but it is as man that he does this, and therefore the account of the garden is found primarily in the Gospel of Luke. There, where he is presented as man, we have the fullest detail of his human struggle, but in John, where he is presented as the Son of God, the account is left out. This is also why, in Matthew, the wise men are recorded as coming to offer their gifts, while in Luke it is the coming of the shepherds that is recorded. Now, both of them came, but Matthew is the Gospel of the King, and the wise men brought gifts fit for a king. But common, ordinary shepherds came to see the perfect man, the One who came to be one of us, equal with us, on our level. And this was Luke's emphasis.

Why is there no account of the ascension of our Lord in Matthew? Well, because as King, he came to rule on earth. Matthew's emphasis is on the kingdom on earth. "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." The ascension is not mentioned in John, because Jesus is the Son of God, and God is everywhere. God is omnipresent and does not go from earth to heaven or heaven to earth; therefore, there is no account of the ascension in John.

Why is there no genealogy of our Lord in Mark and in John? There is a genealogy in both Matthew and Luke, but none in Mark nor John. Well, kings require genealogies; you have to know their descent in the royal line. A man is interested in his ancestry; thus the genealogy in Luke, but no one cares about the ancestry of a servant, and God has no ancestry, therefore, there is no genealogy in Mark and John. Now, all of this shows the supervision of the Holy Spirit. These Gospels are not merely copies, one based on another, as the critics tell us, but they are designed of the Holy Spirit especially to present the different aspects of the Lord Jesus.

That brings us to the Gospel of Mark. The author was a young man named John Mark, the man who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey and proved to be an unfaithful servant. He could not take the pressure, and turned back to go home. It is interesting that the Holy Spirit chose this man, an unfaithful servant, to record for us the faithfulness of the Servant of God, the Lord Jesus. Mark was a companion of Peter, and therefore, the Gospel of Mark contains primarily the thoughts, teachings and viewpoints of Peter. Matthew was a disciple; Luke got his Gospel through the Apostle Paul; John was a disciple, but Peter himself wrote nothing as far as a gospel was concerned. Through his son in the faith, Mark, the Gospel according to Peter came to us.

In the tenth chapter of Acts, Peter gives a very brief summary of all that is recorded for us in the Gospel of Mark. Speaking in the home of Cornelius, we read that Peter stood among them and told them "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him," {Acts 10:38 RSV}.

If you would like to meet Mark personally, turn to the 14th chapter of this little Gospel for the only account of Mark's appearance among the disciples. This is the account of the passion of our Lord as he is moving to the cross, just after he was captured in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the middle of the account, we suddenly read these words (verse 51):

A young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked. {Mark 14:51 RSV}

No other Gospel tells us that, and it is almost certain that this is Mark. He was the son of a rich woman in Jerusalem and it is very likely that his mother owned the house in which the disciples met in the upper room. Mark, therefore, was present at some of these events. Almost certainly this incident is included, because he

himself was involved.

The whole Gospel is summed up for us in a phrase about the Lord in chapter 10:

"For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, ..." {Mark 10:45a RSV}

That is the servant, come to give his life as a ransom for many, or as the King James Version puts it, "not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many," {Mark 10:45b KJV}. In this short verse, you have the divisions of the Gospel of Mark.

There is a brief introductory section that presents the credentials of the servant in the first 13 verses of chapter 1. Following that is the ministry of the servant, from chapter 1, verse 14, to chapter 8, verse 30. The rest of the book is concerned with the ransoming work of the servant.

In the section of the ministry of the servant two things are stressed primarily. First, the authority of the servant. Those who listened to him were filled with astonishment. They said, "He doesn't teach like the scribes and Pharisees, but he speaks with authority, power" {cf, Mark 1:27 RSV}. What he says comes home to the heart. That is because as a servant he knew the secrets of God. He takes out of the treasury of God the secrets of God and makes them known unto men. Since we are men, we hear his words with a sense of awareness that this is reality. There is a note of genuineness about what he says which carries its own convicting power with it. That is why the Gospels and the words of our Lord, as they are read, have power in themselves to convict men.

The scribes and Pharisees needed constantly to bolster themselves with references to authorities and quotations from others, but not our Lord. He never quotes anything but the Scripture. He always speaks with the final word of authority. He never apologizes, never says he made a mistake, never repeats. He speaks always with utter authority.

In this section his authority over the powers of darkness, the demon world, is emphasized. Halloween represents men's awareness of the existence of evil spirits. It has been distorted and twisted to become a pantheon of goblins, spooks and witches who ride on broomsticks, which is really a basic attempt to destroy its effectiveness among men. Behind this facade of clownish humor is the reality of a world of demonic powers that control and affect the minds of men.

As you read through the Gospel of Mark, you see again and again the authority of the Servant of God over the mysterious forces of darkness. The world of the occult was open to him. He knew the black powers, the dark passions that work behind the scenes in men's thinking and minds. Demonic powers, "seducing spirits," they are called later by Paul.

His power in teaching, then, came from his understanding of the minds and hearts of men (remember that John says that no man needed to tell him anything about men because he knew men). Because he knows what is in man, he is the world's greatest psychologist. He knows our basic structure and all that God intended to be wrapped up in the human heart and life. That is why he analyzes so precisely, and why his teaching comes with power.

As you read the Gospel of Mark, you will see that these demonic powers have strange abilities to influence men in remarkable ways, and it is apparent that such influence is always negative. They have, for instance, the power to isolate men from one another, to drive a man in madness out into the desert and wilderness to live alone, to be cut off from the rest of humanity. They have the power to render him a lawless human being, with his fist against every other man and his face against the world. Lawlessness is always a mark of demonic influence.

They also have the power to torment men and make them torment themselves. In describing a demonic person in his Gospel, Mark says that he was "beside himself" {Mark 3:21}. Now, that is a significant phrase, isn't it? Imagine standing beside yourself -- a split personality; in other words, a schizophrenic, separated from himself and set against himself. This is one of the marks of demonic influence. Finally, they have the power to make

men become a menace to society, to be against all the social structure of their day. Over all these influences our Lord had complete power.

Mark also reveals his power over disease. The first account of that power at work is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. That has always been a touching thing to me. It is significant that he would begin with a mother-in-law. We make so many jokes about mothers-in-law, but Peter was evidently very concerned about his. Our Lord touched her fever, and it left her. Then all the people of the city gathered about his door, and he healed every one of them.

The next account is that of a leper. He did the unheard-of thing; he not only healed him, but he touched him. Now, no one ever touched a leper in those days. The law of Moses forbade that they be touched, and the lepers had to go about crying, "Unclean! Unclean!" No one would remotely think of touching a leper, but the compassion of the servant's heart is revealed as he touched him, healed him, and sent him to the priest, the first instance in all of Scripture of a leper ever being healed according to the law of Moses and sent to the priest, as the law demanded.

As a second emphasis, the Gospel of Mark highlights the various attitudes toward our Lord that became apparent as his ministry among men developed. A servant is always affecting people. As he performed his ministry and went about doing good, men developed certain attitudes toward him.

In Nazareth, his own home town, they were offended by him. They did not like what he said. They wanted him to do miracles, but he did not do any. Instead, he spoke to them rather sharply, and they were offended. Then there was Herod the King, who was superstitiously attracted to Jesus, as well as afraid of him. He even wondered if he was John the Baptist risen from the dead.

The account goes on to reveal the attitude of his disciples, after he broke the bread and fed the five thousand, and then amazed them by walking on the sea. We read (chapter 6, verses 51-52):

He got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. {Mark 6:51-52 RSV}

This hardening of the heart is characteristic of the attitudes of many toward our Lord in his ministry as a servant.

Then you find the hypocrisy and critical attitude of the Pharisees, in chapter 7, and the acceptance, then, of many at the close of chapter 7. They were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak," {Mark 7:37 RSV}. That is the mark of a believing heart, one who can say of him, "He does all things well."

There is a very significant act recorded of our Lord in chapter 8, verses 22-26, where we read:

And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man, and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village; {Mark 8:22-23a RSV}

Why did he lead him out of the village?

...and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men; but they look like trees, walking." Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly. And he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village." {Mark 8:23b-26 RSV}

Why? Well, what village was it? Bethsaida. In the Gospel of Matthew, Bethsaida was one of those cities Jesus had pronounced judgment upon, saying,

"... woe to you Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago ..." {Matt 11:21b RSV}

Here is a city that has rejected his ministry and his person, and our Lord will not allow any further testimony to go on in that city. He led the blind man out before he healed him. This is the only case where our Lord did not have an instantaneous, complete healing the first time he spoke. When the healing was complete, he would not even allow him to go back into the village, for here was a village devoted to judgment, having rejected the ministry of the Servant of God. That incident ends the first division of the Gospel of Mark.

Now we have the introduction of the second theme. He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (chapter 8, verse 31):

And he began to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. {Mark 8:31 RSV}

From here on, our Lord's face is set toward Jerusalem and toward the cross. He is going now to be the offering of God, the sacrifice, the servant who gives himself completely for the ransom of those he came to save. The revelation of his program is given in this verse. He came to suffer, to be rejected, to be killed, and after three days, to rise again. That is the way he is going to do it.

Remember Peter's reaction then? He took him and rebuked him; "Spare yourself, Lord." That is always the way of fallen man. The philosophy of the world is "Spare yourself. Don't take on anything you don't have to. Don't get involved. Don't do anything that is not necessary for your comfort." Is that not the philosophy of our age? Our Lord said, "Peter, I recognize where that comes from." He said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men" {Mark. 8:33b RSV}. And then:

... he called to him the multitude with his disciples and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." {Mark 8:34 RSV}

That is the way. Sparing yourself is the way of the Devil. Giving yourself is the way of God. This is the program that carries through the rest of this section of Mark.

The account of the Transfiguration follows, where Jesus reveals his intention for man. The very first verse in chapter 9 suggests it. He said to them:

"Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." {Mark 9:1b RSV}

Then he led Peter, James, and John up on the mountain top, and they literally did not taste of death till they saw the King coming in glory. Peter refers to this, remember, in his letter. He says,

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. {2 Pet 1:16 RSV}

... we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. {2 Pet 1:18 RSV}

It suggests here that God's intention for man and the purpose of our Lord's redemptive work is that men should not taste of death. He came to deliver us from the sting of death, from the awful taste of death. Christians die, but they never taste death. Death is a doorway into life. Why is it true that Christians can stand with Paul and say, "Oh, death, where is thy sting? Oh, grave, where is thy victory?" {1 Cor 15:55 KJV}. Because Hebrews tells us that Jesus tasted death for every one (see Heb 2:9).

In chapter 10 he speaks of the family, of the children. He goes into the junkyard of human life and takes these

gifts of God that men have twisted and misused and strips them of all the encrustation of tradition, the selfishness of man, and beautifully restores them to the purpose God intended.

In chapter 11, you have the beginning of the passion week, our Lord's last week as he moves to the cross. In this chapter, another very significant act that only Mark records is given to us (verse 15):

They [that is, he and his disciples] came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; {Mark 11:15 RSV}

Now, this is not the same act John records in his Gospel, (John 2:13-16). In John's Gospel, this happened at the beginning of our Lord's ministry. But now, at the end of his ministry, for the second time, he overthrows the tables of the money-changers, cleanses the temple; and Mark says, "He would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple," {Mark 11:16 RSV}.

What does that mean? Well, the only ones who carried anything through the temple were the priests. According to the Mosaic law, it was their duty to catch the blood of the animals sacrificed on the brazen altar in the outer court and to bear that blood into the holy place and before the altar. Then once a year the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies and sprinkle that blood on the golden altar of the mercy seat. It was a very significant ritual.

But our Lord stopped all this. He would not allow any man to carry anything through the temple. In other words, he ended the sacrifices. The Jews resumed them until the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., but they did so without divine authority. The sacrifices are meaningless from here on, because he is standing now as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. From this account he moves right on out to the Mount of Olives, from there to the upper room into the Garden of Gethsemane and on to the cross.

The last chapters are concerned with the questions that people asked him. In chapter 11 he answers the questions of the priests and the elders who come out of hatred for him and try to trap him with their questions. In chapter 12 he answers the questions of the Pharisees and the Herodians who likewise try to trap him with their questions, and he sees through their hypocrisy. Also in chapter 12, the Sadducees come and try to trap him. They were the materialists, the ones who did not believe in a resurrection or a spirit life.

Then a scribe with an honest heart asked him the only honest question so far. He came to him and said, "Which commandment is the first of all?" {Mark 12:28b RSV}. Immediately and forthrightly our Lord answered him. In chapter 13 the disciples come with a question, and in his answer our Lord unfolds the whole revelation of the age to come. This is the great predictive section, closing with his return in glory.

In chapter 14 you have two acts that show the gracious character of the servant. Mary came and offered her sacrifice of expensive perfume which she poured out at his feet, and then Judas went out and betrayed him for money. One an act of utter selflessness, and the other an act of complete selfishness.

Beginning with chapter 15, you have the account of the cross. In Mark's account, this is an act of almost incredible brutality done in the name of "justice." The Lord outwardly seems to be a defeated man, a tragic failure, his cause hopelessly lost. He is hounded, bludgeoned and spat upon; as he himself said, "The Son of man will suffer many things." Finally, he is crucified. It seems so unlike the picture of the wonder-worker of Galilee that begins this letter -- the mighty man of power, the servant with authority.

No wonder the high priests, as they saw him hanging there, say of him, "He saved others; he cannot save himself," {Mark. 15:31b RSV}. That is a strange statement. Yet it is one of those remarkable words that reveal how God is able to make even his enemies praise him, because they are both right and wrong. They were wrong in what they meant by those words, "He saved others; he cannot save himself" {Mark 15:31b RSV}, but they were perfectly right in what they said.

As I read this account, I am impressed with the three things that they could not make our Lord do. First, they

could not make our Lord speak:

Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate wondered. {Mark 15:4-5 RSV}

And they could not make him drink; "They offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it," {Mark 15:23 RSV}. Why not? Well, because he could have saved himself if he had. If he had spoken before Pilate, he could have saved himself. The high priests were right; he saved others, but himself he could not, would not, save. Had he spoken, he could have delivered himself before Pilate, but he could not. Had he drunk, he would have saved himself the effect of the agony of the cross and the weight of the burdens of the world coming upon his shoulders, but he would not. He would not spare himself.

Then, finally, they could not even make him die. We read, "Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last" {Mark 15:37 RSV}, which is really an interpretation. What the Greek says is, "He unspirited himself." He dismissed his spirit. He didn't die at the hands of the murderers; he let his spirit go, dismissed it, for he himself said, "No man can take my life from me. I lay it down of myself." He could have refused to die, and they could not have taken his life from him. He said so. He could have hung on the cross and taunted them with their inability to put him to death, but he did not. He died, he unspirited himself.

When you come to the last chapter, the resurrection of our Lord, you learn his reason. He was silent and refused to appeal to Pilate or the crowd, because he was laying the basis for a coming day, when in resurrection power he would appeal to a far greater crowd, when every knee should bow and every tongue should proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. He would not drink to dull his senses because he was laying a basis by which even those who stood about the cross might enter into a life so wonderful, so vigorous, so abundant, that the most zestful moments of earth would pale by comparison.

He would not let men take his life, but he voluntarily laid it down himself in order that he might overcome man's greatest enemy, death, and forever deliver all who would believe in him from the power and awful sting of death. That is the Gospel. He saved others, but himself he could not save.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for your suffering Servant, the One who came not to be ministered unto, as we so frequently demand for ourselves, but to minister and to give his life as a ransom for many. May the impact of that holy, selfless sacrifice imprint itself upon our minds and hearts, that we may never forget that there is One who saved others, but himself he could not save. In Christ's name, Amen.

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