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FOR YOU



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Mark For You

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CONTENTS

Series Preface	5
Foreword <i>by Thomas R. Schreiner</i>	7
Introduction	9
1. Introducing the Son of God <i>Mark 1:1-13</i>	13
2. What Jesus Came For <i>Mark 1:14-45</i>	27
3. A Man of Authority <i>Mark 2:1 – 3:6</i>	41
4. Outsiders and Insiders <i>Mark 3:7 – 4:34</i>	61
5. What No One Else Can Do <i>Mark 4:35 – 6:30</i>	81
6. All Things Well <i>Mark 6:31 – 8:21</i>	103
7. The Struggle for Sight <i>Mark 8:22 – 9:29</i>	119
8. Who is Welcome? <i>Mark 9:30-50</i>	133
9. The Upside-Down Kingdom <i>Mark 10:1-52</i>	149
10. Jesus in the Temple <i>Mark 11:1 – 12:12</i>	169
11. A Battle of Wits <i>Mark 12:13-44</i>	183
12. Signs of the End <i>Mark 13:1-37</i>	197
13. Toward the Cross <i>Mark 14:1-72</i>	213
14. The Divine King <i>Mark 15:1 – 16:8</i>	233
Glossary	255
Bibliography	261

SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Mark For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the one he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

FOREWORD

In certain evangelical circles, reading the Pauline epistles is prized over reading and studying the Gospels. Some mistakenly think that the really deep theology should be mined from Paul's letters. They consider the Gospels to be just a necessary introduction, sort of like an anteroom before one enters the great room of a house. I am thankful that many evangelicals are pushing back against this idea today. Many scholars are bringing out of the treasure house of the Gospels things both new and old (Matthew 13:51–52), and young students are entranced with the vision of Jesus as he is portrayed in the greatest story ever told. Some are awaking from their scholarly slumbers, realizing that it makes no sense to depreciate the fourfold story of our Lord and Savior.

One reason that the Gospels are overlooked or minimized is because they are narratives—stories that record what Jesus Christ did and said. Now, we would think that such stories would delight and enthrall readers, because we all know there is nothing like reading a good story. And yet we may end up reading the Gospel stories at a superficial level, so that once we are familiar with the basic account, we want to move on. But these stories are also carefully structured—and in a profoundly theological way—and there are riches for readers that are missed on a surface reading.

If some are prone to skate over the Gospels, that is particularly true with the Gospel of Mark. After all, it is the shortest of the Gospels. Matthew's Gospel contains great discourses (long teaching sections) that are missing in Mark. Luke, in his Gospel, also tells the story in a distinctive manner, adding many stories and unforgettable parables that aren't in Mark and Matthew. Readers are also drawn to the ineffable beauty of the portrait of Jesus painted in the Gospel of John.

Where does that leave us with Mark? A careful reader will see the stunning craftsmanship and structure of this Gospel. The theology of the book is conveyed through the narrative, so that as we read the story,

we discover who Jesus is and what his words and deeds mean for our lives today.

And that brings me to Jason Meyer's expository guide. This book is characterized by clarity and faithfulness, so that here readers encounter Jesus just as he is presented by Mark. I was struck repeatedly by the lucidity of Meyer's presentation, and he uses illustrations and stories from the modern world to unpack Mark's meaning. And that is not all. The theology of the Gospel is beautifully presented in this volume. This book is relatively brief, but the theology dug out of Mark is profound and life-changing, taking us back 2,000 years to the most momentous events in all of history. I think of the words Augustine heard in a garden around 1,600 years ago and now apply them to this wonderful resource: "Take up and read" (*Tolle lege*).

Thomas R. Schreiner
February 2022

INTRODUCTION TO MARK

Church history has not always been kind to the **Gospel*** of Mark. It has sometimes been seen as the least important Gospel simply because it is the shortest. Some have further cast doubt on its value by regarding it as a kind of *Cliff's Notes* version or an abridged form of Matthew's Gospel (Augustine of Hippo, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, p 78).

Perhaps I picked up on these negative vibes and allowed them to color my view of Mark's Gospel. I still remember the first time I taught through it. I had done a lot of my doctoral work in Paul's letters. Then I got a job as a Bible professor, and I taught a New Testament Survey class. I decided to start with the Gospel of Mark because many people think it was the first Gospel to be written. I entered that study with low expectations and a somewhat impatient eagerness to get through Mark so that I could get to the longer Gospels.

But I was wrong, and my life was changed. If I have a first love now in Scripture, it is this Gospel and the Jesus who stands forth from its pages.

I quickly discovered that Mark is not an abridged version. In fact, when the Gospel writers share a story in common, Mark often gives the longest account. Mark gives us extra color in certain stories, which helps them come alive. But these detailed additions do not make the overall story feel long.

Mark's Gospel is fast-paced and action-packed. Mark uses the word "immediately" 41 times. The action comes fast, and the conflict escalates quickly. Mark devotes more time and attention to stories about Jesus than to the teaching of Jesus. But make no mistake: the teaching is there. What Jesus says is often the climax of the story. It's just that Mark does not record lengthy sections of Jesus' teaching all in one go.

Mark begins with a burst of speed right out of the gate as he declares that Jesus is the divine "Son of God" (Mark 1:1). There are no infancy narratives about the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18 – 2:18;

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 255).

Luke 1:5 – 2:21). No genealogies (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). No explanations of how he carefully compiled this account of Jesus (Luke 1:1-4). Mark does not meander with his message. He narrates this story in such a way that in town after town and story after story the

The message
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message sounds: *The Son of God has come!* There is a trumpet blast at the beginning (1:1-11) and end (15:39) and at all points in between to show that Jesus is the divine Son of God (3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:1-11; 13:32; 14:61-62).

But in the midst of this consistent message, there is a mystery that keeps building. Conflict and confusion

abound because people struggle mightily to understand the mystery of how the powerful Son of God (as he's shown to be in Mark 1 – 8) could also be the Suffering Servant (as we see increasingly in Mark 8 – 16). The mystery and the suspense build up a head of steam as the Son gets closer and closer to **Calvary**. Indeed, it is only at the cross that someone finally puts both pieces together and confesses that the crucified Christ is the divine Son of God (Mark 15:39).

The Gospels are certainly intended to speak to everyone, but each Gospel writer had a more specific target audience in mind. The Gospel of Mark is especially focused on Roman **Gentiles**. Mark explains things from **Hebrew** culture that Roman Gentiles would not understand. Therefore, it is significant that the climax of the Gospel shows a Roman centurion testifying to the truth that the crucified Jesus is the Son of God.

The Main Attraction

Rather than devote space at the beginning to a detailed introduction of the historical background of Mark, I will take a page out of Mark's playbook and move immediately to the main attraction of Mark: Jesus! Mark portrays Jesus in a way that is stunningly compelling.

His unrivaled power and wisdom leave one with a sense of awe, but the portrayal of his unparalleled heart touches us even more deeply. Consider Mark 6:34 as an example:

“When [Jesus] went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

The word for “compassion” here is a wonderful and picturesque Greek word: *splanchnizomai*. That word will not mean anything unless you have a medical background and know the word splanchnology (i.e. the study of the gut). Do you see the stunning truth about Jesus? Sometimes people talk about having “a gut feeling.” It means you feel something from deep within you. In the same way, Jesus did not have some superficial pity for the people. Seeing their needs stirred him way down in the depths of his being. It is hard to remain unmoved when we see Jesus so moved to compassion.

In the **incarnation**, we see not only the power of God and the wisdom of God but the heart of God. Jesus pours out his love on many different people in story after story all the way to the crescendo of the cross. It was there that God poured out his **wrath** on Jesus so that he could pour out his love on us through Jesus.

Basic Outline of Mark

1. Introduction (1:1-13; *Mark For You* ch. 1)

Jesus' Baptism (1:1-11)

Jesus' Temptation (1:12-13)

2. Jesus in Galilee (1:14 – 8:21; *Mark For You* ch. 2 – 6)

Beginning Ministry (1:14-45)

Growing Controversy (2:1 – 3:6)

The Clear Divide Between Insiders and Outsiders (3:7 – 4:34)

Signs and Responses (4:35 – 8:21)

3. The Journey to Jerusalem (8:22 – 10:52; *Mark For You* ch. 7 – 9)

Two-Stage Healing of Blindness (8:22-26)

Peter's Confession: Partial Sight (8:27-30)

First Passion Prediction (8:31-38)

The Transfiguration and Remaining Blindness (9:1-13)

Belief and Unbelief (9:14-29)

Second Passion Prediction (9:30-50)

Blindness of the Pharisees and the Disciples (10:1-16)

Blindness of the Rich Man and the Disciples (10:17-31)

Third Passion Prediction (10:32-45)

Healing of the Blind Man and Discipleship (10:46-52)

4. Jesus in Jerusalem (11:1 – 15:39; *Mark For You* ch. 10 – 14)

Jesus and the Jerusalem Temple (11:1 – 13:37)

Jesus and the Temple of His Body (14:1 – 15:39)

5. Conclusion: Burial and Resurrection (15:40 – 16:8; *Mark For You* ch. 14)

1. INTRODUCING THE SON OF GOD

The first 13 verses are like the opening of a symphony. A well-composed symphony will sound the note or theme that the rest of the musical score will develop and explore. Mark's opening note is his own confession of faith: his belief that Jesus is the Son of God. But Mark is not content to sound this note in isolation. His introduction consists of four stunning testimonies announcing that Jesus is the divine Son of God. This method of sharing multiple testimonies creates an echo effect that builds in volume until it climaxes with the crescendo of God the Father's testimony at the **baptism** of Christ.

But the introduction also sounds a note of cosmic conflict and drama. Satan comes to tempt Jesus—and the Son of God cannot save sinners if he becomes a sinner.

The Testimony of Mark

With great speed, Mark gets right to the point: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (**v 1**).* The Gospel of Mark is all about the “gospel.” In the ancient world, the word “gospel” or “good news” would most often be used of the declaration of a military victory (e.g. 1 Samuel 31:9). But this gospel is defined in relation to the person of Jesus. The good news of salvation is not first and foremost a proposition but a person. Jesus is the embodiment of the good news.

The word “beginning” helps create the effect of bursting off the

* All Mark verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

starting blocks. But it does not mean merely first in sequence. It also means “origin.” So it has the echo of “creation.” The first book of the Bible opens in the same way: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The gospel of Jesus Christ is nothing less than a new creation. It is the unprecedented moment when the Creator of the world steps onto the stage of the world he made. The *beginning of the good news* is wrapped up in the mind-splitting, jaw-dropping identity of Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who has come in the flesh as the promised **Messiah**.

But Mark doesn’t want you to take his word for it. He is not claiming to speak an opinion based on his own authority. He is claiming to speak truth from God. Mark now will show how God has spoken through the prophets in a way that perfectly accords with this testimony.

The Testimony of the Prophets

Mark **1:2-3** is a mixed quotation from three places: Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1; and Isaiah 40:3. Exodus 23:20 took place centuries before Jesus, when God had delivered the Israelites from Egypt (the exodus). God declared that he was going to send a messenger before them. So, Mark **1:2-3** is the first of many times in Mark that we hear the overtones of the exodus deliverance—portraying the deliverance Jesus brings as a new exodus.

This new deliverance was foretold by the prophets Malachi and Isaiah, who are also being quoted here. Malachi 3:1 warns that God will once again send a messenger. This time he will prepare the way before the dreaded day of judgment, which he calls the “day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5). Isaiah 40 speaks of preparation as well. The word of God comes to God’s people in exile and points to a voice crying in the wilderness, which will prepare the way of the Lord.

Mark stitches these three texts together because they highlight the careful preparation that must precede the coming of the Messiah. The key to understanding this verse is to look at the various personal pronouns. There is a first person (“I,” “my”), a second person

("you," "your"), and a third person ("him"). The "I" is a reference to God as the one who sends the messenger (Mark **1:2**). The "you" and "your" have to be references to the people. The third person ("make straight paths for *him*") is explicitly identified as "the Lord" (**v 3**). God is sending someone to prepare the way for the Lord to come. So the prophets testify to the divine identity of Jesus: he is "the Lord" in these prophecies.

This prophecy of the forerunner had already been fulfilled. God gave John the Baptist the task of getting people ready for the greatest moment in human history.

The Testimony of John the Baptist

So, third, Mark gives us the testimony of John the Baptist (**v 4-8**). John prepares people to receive the Messiah by a baptism of **repentance**. This method of preparation highlights the true problem with the people (sin against God) and the solution for the people (repentance).

Mark's portrayal of John also includes where he does this: in the wilderness and the Jordan River (**v 4-5**). The Jordan was a significant landmark. It was not just a river; it was a *border* between the wilderness and the promised land. The people crossed it when they first reached the **promised land** after escaping Egypt and wandering in the wilderness. Now the Jews are receiving a call to leave their place of spiritual exile and enter the wilderness as the place of preparation from which God will deliver them into a new "promised land."

John was not the first person to make this call:

"Even in the first century, Jewish prophets led followers to reenact the crossing of the Jordan River in hopes of anticipating Israel's liberation from the Roman Empire."

(David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story*, p 69)

But the deliverance John points to is not deliverance from the Romans. Earthly powers pale in comparison with the enslaving and condemning power of sin. Unlike other so-called prophets, John

called people to the Jordan to point them to a spiritual problem, not a political one.

Mark now helps the reader see the true identity of John (**Mark 1:6**). He gives a physical description of what John wore (camel's hair, leather belt) and what he ate (locusts, wild honey). The point of the description is to identify John as a prophet like Elijah in terms drawn from 2 Kings:

"[The king] said to [his messengers], 'What kind of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?' They answered him, 'He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.' And he said, 'It is Elijah the Tishbite.'"

(2 Kings 1:7-8)

Imagine a movie on the American Civil War. The camera moves to a person, and there is a still shot of his features. He is tall, with a dark beard and a tall, black top hat. The movie does not need to have anyone break in and say, "By the way, that is Abraham Lincoln." Everyone recognizes him by his distinctive dress. In the same way, everyone can see that John wears the distinctive dress of Elijah—so he is a prophet like Elijah.

Mark finally gives the microphone to John so he can give his testimony about Jesus (**Mark 1:7**). John is the voice crying in the wilderness from Isaiah 40:3, and his message also comes from Isaiah 40. His preaching prepares the Jews for the startling fact that the Mighty God is coming (Isaiah 40:10). John is not the Messiah. In fact, John says he is not even worthy to do the most menial task of a servant. The Jews regarded unfastening someone's sandals as a task reserved for slaves. Jewish instructions say that a disciple should do everything for his teacher that a slave would do—except this one thing (Morna Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p 38).

John again highlights how much greater the Messiah is by contrasting himself with him. "I baptize you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (**Mark 1:8**). The distinguishing mark of John's **ministry** is his connection to water, which is why he is often called John *the Baptist*. The defining mark of the Messiah's ministry will be his connection to the Holy Spirit. What a contrast! No one

can bestow the Spirit in the Old Testament except God. Who could be so identified with the Spirit that he has control to command the Spirit? The Messiah must be God incarnate!

The Testimony of God

Fourth, we have the testimony of God himself (v 9-11). The baptism of Jesus is an epic event—the opening overture of his ministry. It is such a familiar story that many people miss the scandal of it. You should stop in your tracks and ask, “Wait a minute—why?” This was a baptism of repentance. Jesus was not a sinner, and he did not need to repent! What could Jesus possibly be doing in that water? Jesus is identifying with the need of the people that he has come to save. In Christian baptism, going under the water means dying with Jesus, and coming up out of the water means rising to newness of life with Jesus. But before we could identify with Jesus in our baptism, he had to identify with us and all that we had done as sinners in his baptism.

The passing reference to geography (v 9) **foreshadows** the rejection of Jesus that will take place later. Jesus came from Nazareth. This place was something of a byword for unworthiness (see Nathanael’s quip in John 1:46). The Mighty One of Isaiah 40 came from an obscure, lowly place that people mocked.

Another surprising aspect of the story is the word Mark chooses for what happens to the heavens. Matthew and Luke say that the heavens were opened, but Mark says they were “torn open” (Mark 1:10). The tearing or rending of the heavens was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prayer: “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1). This irreversible tear is good news indeed. Some people use the phrase “All hell is breaking loose.” The picture here is so much better. Mark is saying that all *heaven* is breaking loose (Paul Minear, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p 50).

Another reason why Mark uses the word “torn” is to connect what happens here with the end of the story. The story begins with the tearing of the heavens; it ends with the tearing of the temple

curtain (Mark 15:38). This curtain had been a symbol of humanity's separation from God. So, first the heavens are torn, and God comes to us. Then the temple curtain is torn so that we can go to God. The sacrifice of Christ has now torn open the way to God.

Next the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. The Spirit does not have a physical form, but here he descends in a dove-like way (1:10). I think the point of this detail is to convey that the descent was not the swooping attack of an eagle but the gentle hovering of a dove. This is a picture of the new creation because the same Spirit once hovered over the chaos of waters at the beginning of time (Genesis 1:2). The coming of the incarnate God and the gentle hovering presence of the Holy Spirit signal the arrival of the new creation.

The Father testifies that Jesus is the divine Son of God, but his declaration goes further: Jesus is also the promised Suffering Servant. Where do we see those two things? God the Father uses the language of two texts: Psalm 2:7 ("I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, '*You are my Son*'") and Isaiah 42:1 ("Behold, *my servant*, whom I uphold; my chosen, *in whom my soul delights*"—my emphasis). Jesus is the Son of God from Psalm 2 and also the servant of God from Isaiah 42: the

servant who would later be described as suffering to bear the sins of others (Isaiah 53). The Father's testimony provides the structural framework for all of Mark. The powerful Son of God (Mark 1 – 8) is also the Suffering Servant (Mark 8 – 16). Throughout Mark, people struggle mightily to put those two aspects of Jesus' identity together.

But the Father does it seamlessly. His testimony highlights how he is going to address his rebellious world: the divine Son has come to be the suffering servant.

The beloved Son reference comes from the story of the command to sacrifice Isaac: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love"

The Father's testimony provides the framework for all of Mark.



(Genesis 22:2). Jesus' sacrifice would take place in the same region as the sacrifice of Isaac (Mount Moriah is later identified as Jerusalem: see Genesis 22:2 and 2 Chronicles 3:1). So this language seems to further establish how the Son will suffer as a sacrifice.

The identification of Jesus as the Servant of Isaiah 42 is significant for another reason. The very next phrase of Isaiah 42:1 says this about the Servant: "I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

The author, the prophets, John the Baptist, and God the Father all testify to Jesus' true identity. They tell the crystal-clear truth that the divine Son has come into the world. But the response of the Father is unique: Jesus is his beloved Son. The Father's words do not make that relationship; they only highlight the loving relationship that has always existed.

As the prophets had already announced, the people were to respond with repentance when he came. But even as John preached repentance, Jesus identified himself with sinners through baptism. The divine Son came to be a sacrifice for sinners. There is no gospel apart from the suffering and death of the Messiah. There is no salvation without his **substitutionary** sacrifice.

God the Father doesn't need to repent and believe, because he has always truly known and truly loved the Son. We, on the other hand, have walked in both ignorance and rebellion. We must repent and believe that Jesus is the Son of God in order to receive the benefit of what he has done.

Once we have done so, our testimony about the Son becomes similar to the Father's. The Father delights in the Son, and everyone who believes does the same. So the Father's confession of delight in the Son sets the stage for the rest of Mark, as we are invited to delight in everything we see Jesus saying and doing in the rest of the story. There is no one like him. There is no one worth more and nothing that can satisfy like him. Nothing else comes close to Jesus Christ.