

3 Things You Should Know about Mark's Gospel

By Brandon Crowe

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The gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, but it is Christologically rich. As with the other Gospels, Mark needs to be approached as a continuous narrative to appreciate its theological message. Reading Mark as a narrative means allowing the sum of the whole to inform the way we read any part of the whole.

In that light, here are three contributions from Mark's narrative.

1. Mark presents Jesus as the divine Son of God.

Sometimes people think that the gospel of Mark shows us the human side of Jesus, whereas the gospel of John, Paul's letters, Hebrews, and other New Testament books present Jesus as divine. To be sure, in Mark, Jesus is presented as truly man. Jesus is the new Adam who obeys God fully and restores the peace originally intended in the garden of Eden (see Mark 1:12–13).

The humanity of Jesus is often easier to see, since Jesus is clearly a man who lives and moves in the ancient world. He displays anger, compassion, fatigue, hunger, suffering, and He dies. We must affirm and rejoice in the full humanity of Jesus, for our Savior is truly human, no less than we.

Yet, if we think Mark only presents Jesus as truly human, we would drastically underestimate and misunderstand this gospel. Admittedly, too often this has been the case in scholarly accounts of Jesus according to Mark. But we should not miss the clear indications Mark gives us that Jesus is divine.

In Mark 1:1, the gospel message is the message of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This already assumes the divinity of Jesus, as future references using the language "Son of God" make clear. The next reference to "Son of God" comes at Jesus' baptism, where the supernatural heavenly voice identifies Jesus as the Son of God (Mark 1:11). In what follows, Jesus is identified on multiple occasions by supernatural beings as the Son of God (Mark 1:24; 3:11; 5:7–10), including at the transfiguration, where we see a glimpse of the divine glory of Jesus (Mark 9:2–7). Indeed, in Mark, no non-possessed human character confesses Jesus as the Son of God until the end of the gospel, where a Roman centurion at the cross confesses Jesus as the Son of God (Mark 15:39). After the cross, we see clearly in Mark that Jesus has indeed been raised from the dead as He predicted (Mark 16:1–8), and this also points to the divine glory of Jesus that was anticipated in the transfiguration.

We could also list other ways we see the divinity of Jesus in Mark, including the application of the Lord coming to His temple (Isa. 40:3; Mark 1:2–3), the authority with which Jesus forgives sins (Mark 2:5–6), His authority

over nature (Mark 4:35–41), and His authority to raise the dead (Mark 5:35–43). In sum, Jesus is not only truly human in Mark, but truly divine.

2. Jesus speaks clearly in Mark about the unique, substitutionary purpose of His death.

Another key feature of Mark is the intentionality of Jesus' death. Some have argued that the Gospels do not have a theology of atonement. But Mark refutes this position, because Jesus states clearly the purpose of His death on at least two occasions.

One of the clearest texts where Jesus speaks of the intention of His death is Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Notice the substitutionary language "given for many." This phrasing reflects the language of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:11–12.

A second text that demonstrates the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death is found in the words of institution at the Last Supper (Mark 14:22–25). Here Jesus shows by the bread and wine that His body and blood will be given for many. This again reflects the Suffering Servant passage of Isaiah 53 and makes clear that Jesus intended His death to be a substitutionary sacrifice. It is therefore appropriate to continue to celebrate this meal in remembrance of Jesus' death until He comes again (see 1 Cor. 11:23–26).

3. Without undermining the uniqueness of Christ's death, Mark also presents the suffering and death of Christ as a model for discipleship.

One of the dangers in misunderstanding the cross of Christ is when it is viewed merely as a model of high ideals or of sacrificial love rather than a substitutionary death. To be sure, to deny the substitutionary, representative death of Christ for sinners is a theological mistake of the first order. Christ's death is unique and pays the penalty for His people's sins. This must be affirmed with great clarity.

At the same time, Mark does not only present Jesus' death as a unique, substitutionary atonement. He also presents it as a model for discipleship. Three times in Mark, Jesus predicts His death and resurrection (Mark 8:31–33; Mark 9:31; Mark 10:33–34), and in all three cases He weds His discussion of His upcoming rejection and suffering with a call to discipleship (Mark 8:34–38; Mark 9:33–37; Mark 10:35–45). Jesus is not only our Savior, but He is also our model for faithful living in a fallen world (cf. 1 Peter 2:21–25).

Conclusion

Mark's gospel presents us a Savior who is truly divine, truly man, and who gives His life uniquely as a substitutionary atonement for the sins of His people. We benefit from His death by faith, even as we learn from Him that the way of glory is the way of suffering.