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# Lesson 1

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## Background

**F**or a few decades after Christ's ascension, the world did not have the full written gospel record. During those years the redemptive message of the gospel was being proclaimed by word of mouth (read Acts 15:7), based on trustworthy recollections of eye-witnesses. And at least some of those recollections were being written out on scrolls for a more permanent record. We do not know the exact circumstances of the writing of each of the four gospels, but we are confident that each appeared on schedule according to a divine plan.

In the case of the gospel of Mark, it is generally held that Peter was Mark's informant of eyewitness stories about Jesus. It is possible that Peter was referring to this forthcoming manuscript by Mark when he wrote 2 Peter 1:15. (Read the verse in the context of its two preceding verses.) In this first lesson we will be studying this and other aspects of the background of the actual writing of Mark, so that we will feel more at home when we begin to study the Bible text itself. In Lesson 2 we will move to the next stage of Bible study, which is a survey of the whole book. Then we will be ready for our main task, which is analyzing in detail the Bible text of all sixteen chapters (Lessons 3-14). This study guide thus follows the standard order of procedure for Bible study, which is:

1. becoming acquainted with the BACKGROUND of the book's writing (Lesson 1)
2. making a general SURVEY of the book's contents (Lesson 2)
3. examining each part, in detailed ANALYSIS (Lessons 3-14)

## I. BACKGROUND

### A. The Man Mark

Although the human author is not identified in the gospel, internal evidence from the text itself agrees with the external witness of the early church Fathers that John Mark was the author.<sup>1</sup> This is the man cited by name in the following New Testament passages: Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37-39; 1 Peter 5:13; Colossians 4:10; Philemon 23-24; 2 Timothy 4:11.

1. *Birth and early life.* Mark was born some ten to fifteen years after Jesus of Nazareth and Saul of Tarsus, so he may have been a late teenager at the time of the crucial events of Jesus' public ministry. His parents gave him the Hebrew name John (Hebrew, *Johanan*, "Jehovah is gracious"), and his Roman surname Mark<sup>2</sup> (cf. Acts 15:37) may have been adopted at a later time in his life.

In Colossians 4:10 (NASB\*) we read that Mark was a cousin of Barnabas, a key person in Acts 4-15. Mark's mother, Mary, was a devout woman of prosperous means. Her home, which may have been located in the valley of Kidron near the Garden of Gethsemane, was dedicated to God. This is confirmed by Luke, who records in Acts 12:12-17 that in the early days of the Christian church, after James the Elder had been slain by Herod Agrippa, and while Peter was in prison for the testimony of the gospel, she was courageous and faithful to the extent of letting her house be the meeting place for the local believers. And who knows but that Jesus visited this home during His lifetime and even partook of the Last Supper there?

Many believe that the unnamed "young man" of Mark 14:51 was Mark himself. (Read Mark 14:43-52.) E.M. Blaiklock suggests this imagined (though not impossible) story behind the Mark account:

In the long room on the roof of the house of Mary, the rich widow lady of Jerusalem, the Lord and His band meet for what was to be the Last Supper. In his room below, awake and alert, for he sensed the danger which lurked about the house, lay Mary's son, John Mark. He heard the hurried steps of Judas on the stair

\**New American Standard Bible.*

1. Among these are the Greek Fathers Papias (A.D. 70-155), Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165), Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-217), Irenaeus (A.D. 120-102), Origen (A.D. 185-254), Eusebius (A.D. 270-340); and the Latin Fathers Tertullian (A.D. 150-220) and Jerome (A.D. 340-420). (Most dates are approximate.)
2. The Greek *Markos* is from the Latin *markus*, "large hammer."

way without, and listened with sharper care. And then the noise of feet, and the rest depart.

On a sudden impulse the boy seizes a linen sheet from his bed, wraps it round his body and follows. He watches under the olive trees, sure that some crisis is at hand. A flare of torches, and the betrayer is there. With a boy's reckless loyalty he shouts some protest, and angry hands lay hold of him. Slipping out of his sheet Mark escapes. Perhaps he bore a cruel and mutilating sword-slash across his fingers, for an old tradition says that in the early Church Mark was called "the Stumpfingered."<sup>3</sup>

Indelible were the impressions being made as young John Mark grew up in the environs of a professing "holy" city and in the shelter of a genuinely devout home. He must have been an eyewitness of some events of Jesus' life. He could not escape crossing the trail of the Son of God. And all the while he was being prepared for a later work in the service of the gospel, studying the Scriptures and learning the languages current in the stream of the metropolis—Aramaic, Greek, and Latin.

Mary had a house and a family, and they were given to God. And God had a Son and a gospel, and they were given to the world. Mary's Mark and God's gospel were brought together, and millions of souls since then have cherished the possession of this, the gospel according to Mark.

2. *Conversion.* Though the devout Judaistic heritage formulated the recollections of Mark's earlier life, there came the day in his life when, like his mother, he was confronted with the claims of the man of Galilee and was compelled to answer the question, "Who do *you* say that I am?" (cf. 8:29). Peter may have been the disciple used of God to lead Mark to Christ, and this may be why Peter speaks of Mark as "Mark my son" (1 Pet. 5:13). Details of Mark's conversion experience, however, are not given in the New Testament record.

3. *Christian ministry.* Two gospel writers, Matthew and John, were apostles of Jesus. The other two, Mark and Luke, were not of the chosen twelve. The New Testament verses where Mark's name appears reveal some of the highlights of Mark's experience in Christian service.

Read each passage, and the context surrounding it, and record biographical notes about Mark in each case.

Observe among other things the variety of co-laborers, and the fact of Paul's and Mark's reconciliation after the separation of Acts 13:13. What do you think helped Mark to mature spiritually be-

3. E.M. Blaiklock, *Mark: The Man and His Message*, p. 9-10.

Passage	Date A.D.	Place <sup>4</sup> and Ministry	Colaborers
Acts 12:12, 25	46		
13:5	47		
13:13	47		
15:37-39	49		
Col. 4:10 (NASB)			
Philem. 23-24	61		
2 Tim. 4:11	67		
1 Pet. 5:13	68		

tween his turning back at Perga (Acts 13:13) and his writing of the gospel at Rome some twenty years later? Blaiklock comments on this, "He was taking up the task he abandoned at Perga. . . . In Mark's Gospel . . . we meet the man who failed and tried again, the man who, by a friend's help, rebuilt a testimony, and left that testimony in a deathless book."<sup>5</sup> What lessons can Christians learn from this?

4. *Mark's character.* A character sketch of Mark based on the Bible is at best only partial. But from the verses about him, and the gospel written by him, there emerges a portrait of an energetic servant of Christ who was impulsive, hasty, alert, zealous, friendly, cooperative, humble, and honest. Mark matured over the years, just as his spiritual father, Peter, did. At the peak of that divine process he had the intense joy of penning the "unadorned and unpretentious, but quite overpowering"<sup>6</sup> gospel according to Mark.

5. *Death.* Mark died not long after Peter's martyrdom of A.D. 67, according to tradition.

## B. The Book of Mark

1. *Title.* A common title appearing in ancient Greek manuscripts of Mark is *Euaggelion kata Markon* ("gospel according to Mark"). The account is the "gospel of Jesus Christ" (1:1), *according to* the divinely inspired writer, Mark.

2. *Place and date of writing.* Mark wrote his book while living in Rome. There are two main views as to the date of writing:

4. For the places involved in some of the passages, follow the views that Paul wrote Colossians from Rome; "Babylon" was a symbolical reference to Rome; and Timothy was living at Ephesus when Paul wrote 2 Timothy.

5. Blaiklock, pp. 14-15.

6. C. F. D. Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 4.

early, and late.<sup>7</sup> This manual follows the latter view that the gospel was finished around A.D. 68, soon after Peter's death and before the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70).<sup>8</sup> According to this view, Matthew and Luke had already been written.

3. *Peter's contribution.* Some time near the close of the earthly lives of Peter and Paul, a gospel record of the ministry of Jesus was taking shape in the mind of Mark, by the moving of the Holy Spirit. At the time, both Mark and Peter were living in Rome. Mark's gospel was to be a brief eyewitness account of Jesus' life. But Mark, not being one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, obviously did not see or hear firsthand much of Jesus' ministry. This is where Peter came into the picture. Peter's close relationship with Jesus, as one of His apostles, fitted him superbly for sharing with Mark the eyewitness data for writing. We may wonder why Peter, a gifted writer, was not chosen to write the gospel. We are satisfied that God knew what kind of a gospel record He wanted and that Mark was the person so fitted for the task. So it was Peter the informant, Mark the writer, and God the inspirer.

4. *Purpose.* Mark's gospel was especially directed to the Roman mind,<sup>9</sup> which was impressed more by action and power than by discourse and dialogue. Hence it would be accurate to say that Mark stressed "the actions, not so much the words, of Jesus," to reach such an audience with the claims of the gospel. Chart A shows a few of Mark's distinctive features compared with those of the other three gospels.

COMPARISON OF THE FOUR GOSPELS

Chart A

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN
Jesus as:	King of Israel	Servant of the Lord	Son of Man	Son of God
Reader:	Jew	Roman	Greek	World
Prominent ideas:	Law and Promise	Power and Service	Grace and Fellowship	Glory and Life

Chart B shows the coverage that Mark gives to the public ministry of Christ (the shaded areas represent Mark's coverage). Such selectivity is always divinely inspired. How many chapters of Mark are devoted to the extended ministries of the second year of Jesus'

7. For a defense of an early date of A.D. 50, see W. Graham Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1948), pp. 170-71.  
8. Mark had prophesied the city's fall in chap. 13 of his gospel.  
9. Among evidences of a non-Jewish audience is the fact that Mark explains Jewish and Aramaic terms and customs not clear to the average Roman (e.g., in 5:41; 7:2-4, 11, 34).

public ministry? Compare this with the number of chapters devoted to the last week—the period of sacrifice.

5. *Theme.* A key verse of Mark identifies clearly the theme of Mark's gospel: "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45). We will look more into this subject in our survey study of Lesson 2.

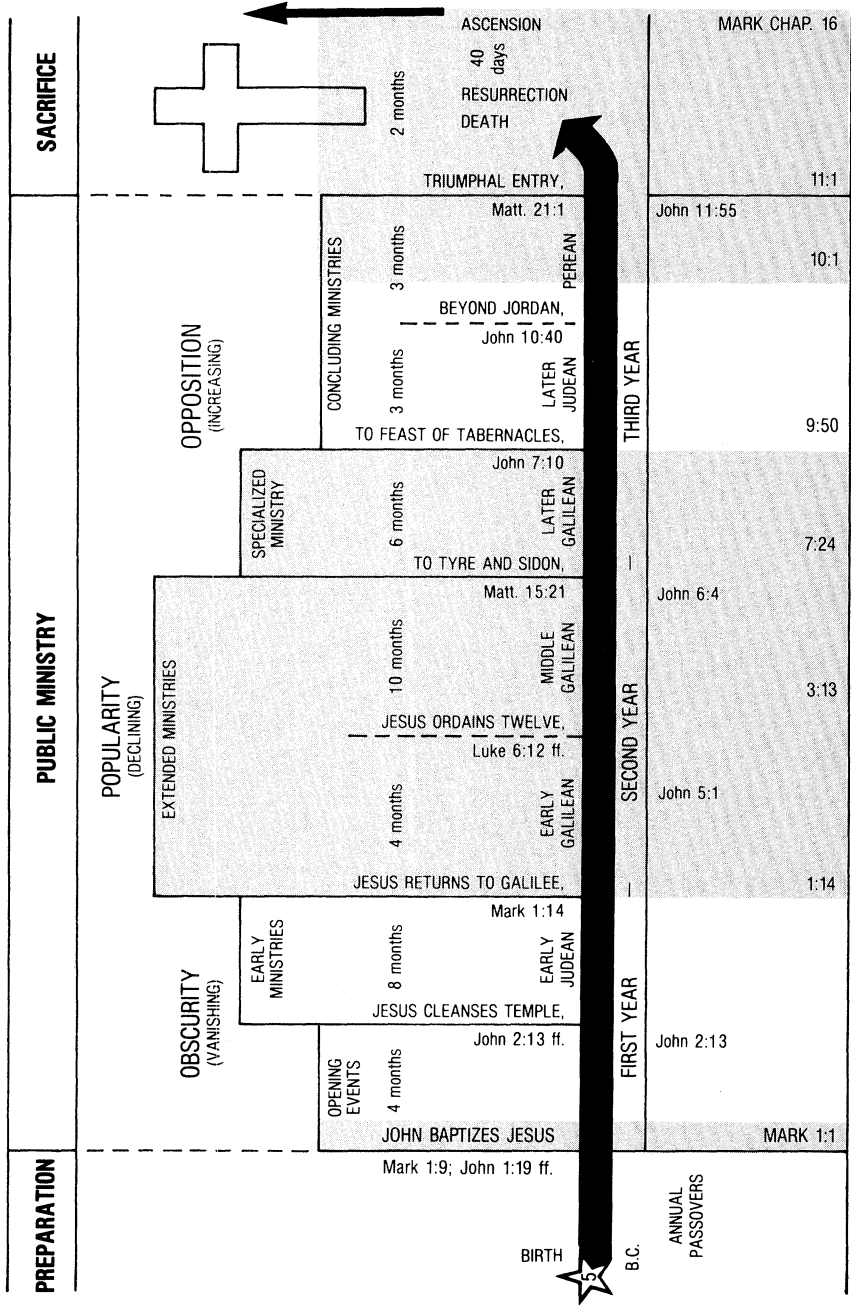
### *Some Review Questions*

See how much of this lesson you can recall by answering the following questions:

1. What was Mark's home background?
2. When was Mark born, and how old was he when he died?
3. What were the highlights of Mark's Christian service?
4. How did each of the following men influence Mark's life: Barnabas, Paul, Peter?
5. What kind of a person was Mark?
6. Some believe that Mark was the first gospel to be written, partly because it is the shortest of the four gospels. How might you account for its brevity if it was written at the late date of A.D. 68, *after* Matthew and Luke had already been written?
7. Why did God want more than one gospel account written, rather than one large composite work?
8. What is the purpose and theme of Mark's gospel?
9. List some spiritual lessons you have learned in your study thus far.

**THE LIFE OF CHRIST SHOWING COVERAGE BY MARK (Shaded area)**

**Chart B**



# Lesson 2

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## Survey

**W**ith this lesson we begin our study of the actual text of Mark's gospel. Our task here is to survey the whole book, mainly for general impressions, before moving on to analyze each smaller part. "Image the whole, then execute the parts" is the standard procedure.

Your survey study of Mark will be both stimulating and fruitful if you know **WHAT** you are searching for and **HOW** to do the searching. Four main activities constitute the **WHAT** of survey study:

1. Discovering the book's overall *theme*
2. Observing *patterns* and *movements* in the literary structure, or organization, of the book
3. Noting *highlights* of the book and finding *clues* for the study of its various parts
4. Getting a *feel* for the book's atmosphere and approach

Keep these goals always before you as you make your survey study of Mark.

As to the **HOW** (method) of survey study, there are various procedures. Basically, however, survey study is of three main stages: (1) making the initial acquaintance of the book; (2) scanning the prominent individual items; and (3) searching for the integrating relationships. These are the things we will be doing for the remainder of this lesson. An important bit of advice here is that throughout your survey study of this lesson you avoid getting bogged down in small details. Keep in mind that detailed analysis begins with Lesson 3.

### **I. STAGE ONE: MAKING THE INITIAL ACQUAINTANCE**

1. Scan the book of Mark in one sitting if possible. It is not necessary to read every word or line at this time. If your Bible has



is not in the segment title itself but in the mental process of beginning to identify parts and movements of the book.

3. What other things have you observed about Mark, in addition to your first impression? Make a list of these. Compare your observations with this partial list:

*a.* Most of the different actions in Mark are short—like candid snapshots.

*b.* Most of the text reports events, with little comment.

*c.* Some of the most awesome and soul-shaking events are recorded in what appears to be calm, matter-of-fact fashion.

*d.* The word “immediately” appears often.

*e.* The narrative does not report the birth and infancy of Jesus.

*f.* Although most of the gospel is narrative, two long teaching sections appear in 4:1-34 (parables) and chapter 13 (prophecy).<sup>2</sup>

*g.* Mark frequently reports personal gestures of Jesus (e.g., 3:5; 5:41; 7:33; 8:23; 9:27; 10:16); emotions of Jesus (3:5; 6:6, 34; 8:12; 10:14, 21); and people’s reactions to Jesus’ ministries (1:27; 2:7; 4:41; 6:14; 7:37; 14:1).

4. The writing style of Mark can be described as graphic, vigorous, concise, clear, orderly, and dynamic. Can you think of different examples from the text that illustrate these descriptions?

### III. STAGE THREE: LOOKING FOR INTEGRATING RELATIONSHIPS

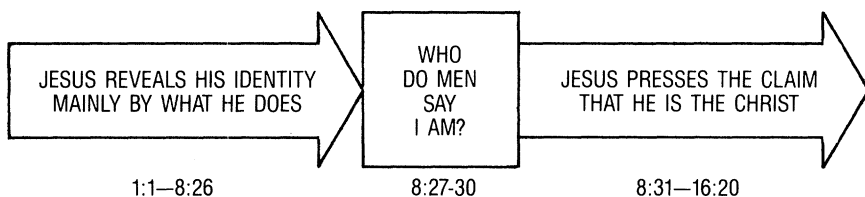
Mark, like the other three gospels, is a unified story of selected parts of Jesus’ life. Let us see how the author organized his material.

#### A. Looking for a key turning point in the narrative

It is clear from all four gospels that Jesus came to this earth to minister by *life* and by *death*. Mark 10:45, which we shall use as a key verse for Mark, states this clearly. (Read the verse.) Where in Mark’s gospel does Jesus move from the *ministration* phase to the *sacrifice* phase by explicitly telling of His coming death? The answer is: at 8:27ff. (Read these verses). Survey Chart D shows 8:27-30 as the strategic center of Mark, with a main division at 8:31. (Study carefully this part of Chart C.)

Observe the key question of Jesus, and Peter’s answer, in 8:27-30. Then study the following diagram, which is a key outline for Mark’s gospel:

2. A comparison of the four gospels shows these percentages reporting Christ’s words: Mark, 43 percent; Luke and John, nearly 50 percent; and Matthew, 60 percent.



Up to 8:27, Mark shows how Jesus revealed His true identity mainly by His deeds. Then (8:27-30), Jesus inquires about His reputation. People have not seen Him as the Son of God but only as one sent from God (such as John the Baptist or Elijah). To extend His public ministry by giving more of the same kind of revelation would not change the people's reactions. He has basically fulfilled His task of ministering ("For even the Son of man came . . . to minister," 10:45*a*) and must now proceed to the second task, that of giving His life ("and to give his life a ransom for many," 10:45*b*). This was not the life of a mere man but of the Christ—the anointed (*krino*) Messiah—whom Peter, by revelation, confessed Him to be (8:29). And so, as 8:31 records, Jesus begins to teach His disciples *explicitly* that He must suffer, be rejected, be killed, and after three days rise again. The story of Mark from this point on, then, is the story of *sacrifice*.

## B. Looking for groups of material

An effective way of showing the skeletal framework of Mark is to construct a survey chart similar to Chart D. The bulk of a survey chart shows how the small individual segments combine to make groups of material with a common subject. For example, the two segments beginning at 14:1 and 14:43 are identified as the section, JESUS AS SACRIFICE (see survey chart).

One of the advantages of a survey chart over a standard outline is that various topical outlines can be viewed simultaneously. Also a survey chart is a vivid eye-gate reference for context as one analyzes an individual segment. A division, which is a group of sections, is determined in the same manner as a section. Study the divisions shown on Chart D.

You may want to construct your own survey chart by looking for groups of subject matter similar to the example given above. In any case, study Chart D carefully before proceeding with the next lesson, for such an overview of the book of Mark will help you immeasurably as you proceed with your analytical studies.

Observe the following on this survey chart:

1. Compare the opening segment and the concluding segment.
2. What outlines show two main divisions in the book?
3. Study the various sectional and divisional outlines.
4. Note the geographical pattern of Mark's account.
5. Record at the bottom of the chart the various oppositions to Jesus and the part the disciples play in the gospel record. (You may want to do this exercise as you move along in the study guide.)

### **C. Identifying a main theme**

In your own words, what is the main theme of Mark? Your survey study up to this point should supply the answer. Try also assigning a title to Mark that would coincide with the theme. Observe the title shown on Chart D, "The Servant Jesus."

#### *A Summary of Mark's Gospel*

Keep Chart D before you as you read the following summary, observing the swift movement of action in Mark's gospel:

Announced and anointed for a redemptive ministry (Presentation 1:1-13), Jesus preached and worked in the company of the multitudes, attracting many (Popularity 1:14-45) and angering not a few (Opposition 2:1-3:6). Jesus anticipated the day when He would no longer minister on this earth; therefore He began to organize a band of close disciples. (Organization 3:7-35) while He continued to teach (Parables 4:1-34) and perform miracles (Miracles 4:36-5:43). Delegating more and more responsibility to the disciples (6:1-32), He nevertheless remained the tireless servant of the multitudes, constantly revealing His true identity but eventually coming to the moment when this phase of His ministry concluded (Peak of Advance 6:33-8:30). From this point on, as He set His face toward Jerusalem for the last time, He pressed the claim of His being the Christ. He explicitly told of His coming death and resurrection (Jesus as Redeemer 8:31-10:52), and claimed divine authority and prophesied of the future (Jesus as Lord 11:1-13:37). Now the death plot is drawn up (Plot 14:1-11); Jesus spends His last hours of fellowship with His disciples (With Disciples 14:12-42); and He is tried, crucified, and buried (14:43-15:47). Raised from the dead by God, He appears to His disciples and gives them the mandate of worldwide evangelization, as He is received up into heaven (Triumph chap. 16).

# MARK THE SERVANT JESUS

Chart D

