

## Week 1: Introduction to Mark

### Hook



**Main Point:** Mark wrote the story of Jesus, the mighty Son of God.

Boxing legend and ordained minister George Foreman is famous not only for his powerful punches and grilling empire but also for his unique approach to naming his children. He had 10 kids – five daughters (Natalie, Leola, Georgetta, Freeda and Michi) and five sons, all named George. That’s right – George Jr., George III, George IV, George V, and George VI.

When asked about this unusual choice in a *Today* interview, Foreman explained that while each son shares the same first name, they all “go by their own nickname,” because it’s important that “they’re recognized and treated as individuals.” George, Jr. is “Junior”; George III is “Monk”; George IV is “Big Wheel”; George V is “Red”; and George VI is “Little Joey.” Same name – different personalities.<sup>1</sup>

**Q: Do you have siblings? What do you share in common? What makes you unique?**

**Q: What do the Gospels have in common? What makes each one distinct?**

**Transition:** Today, as we begin our journey through the Gospel of Mark, we’ll explore what makes Mark stand out from Matthew, Luke and John – four Gospels, one Savior, but each with its own unique voice and emphasis.

## **Week 1: *Introduction to Mark***

### **Book**

**Main Point:** Mark wrote the story of Jesus, the mighty Son of God.

**Acts 12:25; 13:13; and 15:36–41; 2 Timothy 4:9–13; and Philemon 1:24 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** Author: John Mark, a coworker of both Peter and Paul

**Q: What is the progression of Paul and Mark's relationship throughout these passages?**

Since the first century, church tradition has attributed this Gospel to John Mark, who was a companion of Paul and Barnabas in their first missionary journey. Mark is first mentioned in Acts as the son of a woman named Mary, whose house in Jerusalem was used by the disciples as a place to gather and pray while Peter was in prison for his faith (Acts 12:12). The text doesn't mention a husband, so she was likely a widow. Because a large group of people met there, her house was large enough for many to gather, and a servant girl answered the door, indicating she was wealthy. It was in Mark's mother's home that Peter appeared suddenly when the people thought he was still in prison. An angel had appeared to Peter; the chains fell from his wrists; the prison door opened; and he walked out, which meant Mark knew firsthand about this miracle and the supernatural power of God.

Mark was involved in the earliest days of the church in Jerusalem, witnessing miracles and seeing the power of prayer (Acts 12:15–17). As one of the wealthier families, his family generously shared with the community (Acts 4:32–35). He went as a helper on Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey. Barnabas, Mark's cousin, was a leader in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1; Colossians 4:10). When the leaders of the church in Antioch were fasting and praying, the Holy Spirit told them to send Paul and Barnabas on this journey, and they chose to take Mark with them. But only a few stops into the journey, Mark returned to Jerusalem. We aren't sure how much time had elapsed, but it's just a paragraph into the story, so it seems early (Acts 13:13).

We don't know why Mark left. Perhaps, having grown up in a wealthy home in a large city, he wasn't used to the difficulties of this kind of travel. They'd just had opposition from a magician; it could have been fear. But the Holy Spirit struck that man blind, so Mark should have felt confident of the Spirit's power over the demonic. He could have simply been needed at home. Whatever the reason, Paul saw his leaving as desertion. When they were planning their second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take

Mark, but Paul refused because he had deserted them before. They had such a sharp disagreement about it that they split up; Barnabas took Mark and Paul took Silas (Acts 15:36–41). It is sad they had this disagreement, but it resulted in two groups going out and the Gospel spreading even further.

About 13 years later, when Paul wrote Philemon from prison in Rome, he again called Mark one of “his fellow workers” (Philemon 1:24). About four years after that, when he wrote 2 Timothy near the end of his life, Paul asked Timothy to bring Mark with him to see Paul because Mark was helpful to him in his ministry. It may have taken a while, but Paul eventually forgave Mark and saw him as a fellow apostle who was useful in ministry. Mark was also a coworker of Peter’s, close enough that Peter called him “my son” (1 Peter 5:13).

Some scholars believe Mark was really writing Peter’s version of the story of Jesus in his Gospel, basically acting as Peter’s secretary. This was the view of the early church fathers Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Jerome.<sup>2</sup> The style does fit Peter’s personality; it’s action packed; everything happens “immediately.” But of all the Gospels, Mark offers the least flattering portrait of Peter (which could be Peter’s humility in writing about himself), and it contains fewer stories about Peter or things he may have witnessed than the other Gospels. But Mark also contains Pauline themes and priorities; Paul’s influence can be clearly seen in his Gospel. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mark was writing, in part, based on testimony from all the apostles he interacted with in his ministry.<sup>3</sup>

**Q: Why is it important that the Gospels were written by this first generation of believers?**

**Q: Why is it important for us to pass down the story of Jesus from generation to generation? How are you passing down the Gospel to the next generation?**

**Mark 3:17; 5:41; 7:34 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** Audience: Mark preached the Gospel to Roman Christians under persecution.

**Q: All of the phrases translated by Mark were from Aramaic, the colloquial language spoken by Jews in Jesus’ day (Hebrew was the formal language for religion and government). If Mark felt the need to translate these phrases, what does that tell us about his audience?**

Because of the way Mark’s Gospel is written, he seemed to be writing to people who already knew the Gospel message and basic Christian theology but were Gentiles, not

Jews. He assumed his readers regarded the Old Testament as the Word of God (7:8) and understood what it meant to say Jesus was the “Messiah” (8:29). However, he seemed to feel the need to explain some of the finer points of Jewish matters, such as what the Sadducees believed (12:18) or what the Pharisees meant by eating with “defiled hands” (7:2–5). He assumed his readers already knew the meaning of Roman words such as *legion* (5:9), *centurion* (15:39), and *praetorium* (15:16), but he regularly defined Aramaic words and phrases such as *corban* (7:11), *Talitha kourai* (5:41), and *Golgotha* (15:22); Aramaic was the language the Jews spoke at the time.<sup>4</sup> This all points to a *Roman* Christian audience. Mark also used simple casual language that made it accessible for all people. That and its brevity also made it easy to read aloud, which was how most people would have originally heard it.<sup>5</sup>

Mark’s Gospel seems concerned with offering comfort, courage and counsel to people who were suffering persecution for their faith, which happened in Rome under Nero (AD 65–73) and explains why the Gospel writers felt the need to start recording the story of Jesus. Up to this point, the stories and teachings of Jesus had been passed orally by the disciples who had walked with Him. Memorizing the teachings of the rabbi was part of the role of a disciple of any rabbi at the time. But at this point, many of those first-generation disciples who had walked with Jesus while He was on earth in His ministry were being killed. They weren’t sure how long it would be before Jesus came back, and they wanted to preserve the Gospel for future generations.<sup>6</sup>

Mark didn’t include a ton of Jesus’ teachings, so he wasn’t writing a textbook for religious instruction. His story is mostly fast-paced action, emphasized by the repetition of the word *immediately*; it is the story of the power and authority of Jesus, the mighty Son of God. Mark’s Gospel is structured very simply, which keeps us focused on the forward-moving action. While the other Gospels have Jesus going back and forth from Jerusalem to Galilee, Mark tells a single linear story from Galilee to Jerusalem to the Cross.<sup>7</sup>

Like all the Gospels, the climax of Mark is the Cross and Resurrection. More than 35 percent of Mark’s Gospel is focused on the passion, the last week of Jesus’ life. This is the purpose of the story and why these books are called Gospels. The Gospels are a unique genre of literature. They aren’t just the narrative of Jesus. They are more like sermons; they have a persuasive purpose. Scholars call them *kerygma*, the Greek word for “proclamation,” because their purpose is to preach or proclaim the Good News of Jesus.

**Q: What does focusing on the *actions* of Jesus tell you about Him? Think about *all* the things Jesus did, not just His miracles.**

**Q: What do these actions tell us about the Gospel? The world? Our mission?**

**Mark 4:35–41 and Mark 6:6–13 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** Mark's focus on action spurs us to action as His ambassadors to the world.

**Q: How did the disciples respond when Jesus calmed the storm? What did it look like for those of "little faith" to follow him as disciples?**

**Q: When Jesus sent the disciples out on mission, what did they do? How did this mirror what Jesus did in His ministry? What does this tell us about our mission?**

Though the Gospels all preach the Good News of Jesus, each one tells the story from a slightly different perspective, just as four different preachers today preaching on the same topic or passage would each have a unique sermon. Though the message is the same, they each speak to a different audience and have different emphases. Mark's Gospel doesn't contain big blocks of teaching like Matthew's does; it's more focused on Jesus' actions. Mark didn't include anything about Jesus' birth or childhood because he wanted to get right to the action of Jesus' ministry.

Mark's story is the shortest, most fast-paced, and most narrative, with the most casual language, so it is the easiest Gospel to read aloud in one sitting. Mark also wrote a lot in the present tense to make it feel as though things were happening in the moment, as if his readers were in the middle of the story. Because it's more focused on Jesus' action, it's also more focused on our action. Instead of asking what we should think or believe, Mark's question is what we should do in response to Jesus.

Because of its fast-paced action, Mark's storytelling paints a picture of the power of Jesus as the mighty Son of God. Yet he also gave us the most human portrait of Jesus in the Gospels. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus got hungry; He got tired. Mark showed Jesus exhibiting a full range of human emotions. Mark showed Jesus more as the suffering servant of Isaiah than a conquering hero. In addition to being 100-percent God, Mark helps us to understand that Jesus was also 100-percent human, a high priest who could empathize with our every pain.

Mark's Gospel paints the disciples in an almost completely negative light. It is said that in Mark the only thing the disciples did right was to leave their nets to follow Jesus in the first place. After that, they disappointed Him at every turn. While other Gospels paint the disciples more positively as future leaders of the Church, Mark portrayed them only negatively, reminding us of an important theological fact consistent with the

evangelistic nature of the Gospels – that none of us are “worthy” to be disciples, and yet Jesus loves us, forgives us, saves us, and uses us anyway. New Testament scholar Mark Allan Powell writes, “Despite their failings, Jesus keeps them as His disciples. The point for Mark seems to be that discipleship is a relationship established by the call of Christ and defined by His own faithfulness, not by any merit that can be attributed to the disciples themselves.”<sup>8</sup>

Mark’s message is that all have fallen short of the glory of God, yet He came to die for us anyway. And no matter how much we fail, God can use us as His ambassadors to bring the message of grace and hope to a dark world. Mark’s Gospel ends rather abruptly, but it fits Mark’s emphasis on what we should *do* in response to Jesus. With this abrupt ending, we are left with a feeling that we have a role in finishing the story. What happens next is up to us. Will we go and share the Good News with others? Will we go and live as Jesus lived and love as He loved?

**Q: How is God calling you to *action* in response to Mark’s portrait of Jesus? How does asking “What would Jesus do?” help you to know?**

**Q: How does it make you feel to know God used even these weak disciples to accomplish His mission in the early church? How does God want to use you in His mission today?**

## **Week 1: Introduction to Mark**

### **Took**

**Main Point: Mark wrote the story of Jesus, the mighty Son of God.**

The Gospel of Mark is all about action – and this week, it's your turn to act. Don't just admire Jesus; follow Him. Don't just hear the Word; do something with it.

Maybe that means finally sharing the Gospel with the coworker you've been praying for. Maybe it's gathering your family and saying, "From now on, church is a priority – we're setting a new rhythm." Perhaps it's taking a step of obedience in generosity and starting to tithe or it's finally opening your Bible – not just for a verse here or there, but committing to a plan to read through it. Perhaps your next act of obedience is reaching out to your divisional minister, "I need to be discipled. Will you help me grow?"

Whatever your next step is – take it!

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** Reflect on the unique message Mark preached about Jesus through his Gospel. How does his focus on the action of Jesus affect the way you think about your faith, your actions, and your mission in the world? How does his focus on the power of Jesus impact your faith? How does it encourage you? How does his focus on Jesus' humanity influence your relationship with Jesus? How does his focus on the weakness of the disciples affect the way you think about yourself? What does his emphasis on the Cross make you think about the purpose of the message of the Gospel? How can you share that message with the world, with both your words and with your actions?

**PRAY** for God to give you a fuller picture of both the humanity and the divinity of Christ through this study. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you and empower you to do His will and live on mission for His kingdom. Ask Him to enlighten your understanding of the Gospel and to bring you into closer fellowship with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Pray for God to strip away any presuppositions you may have so you are able to read Mark with fresh eyes and an open heart to hear what the Spirit would say to you.

**ACT:** Read Mark. Read the book of Mark aloud in one sitting, as the original hearers would have heard it. Or listen to an audio version. You can read it alone, but it would be ideal to read it with someone else. Don't think too much or linger in any one part. Simply read it and experience the story.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.today.com/parents/celebrity/george-foreman-kids-rcna134106>

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

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<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).