

The Gospel of Mark

New Testament Survey – Lesson 4

We all respected Bob Rust. There was something quirky and foreign about the way his brain grasped the Greek language. To those of us majoring in Biblical Languages, his dexterity with Greek was nothing short of phenomenal. We had some marvelous Greek students in the program, but Bob was in another league.

One evening in the dining hall, I found myself sitting with Bob and a few other friends. Our conversation shifted to the subject of art. For Bob, art was a pretty painting, nothing more and nothing less. I took strident issue with Bob, arguing that a pretty picture was a pretty picture, but by definition, art had to be something more. Art had to have some meaning beyond simple appearance to qualify as art. For some, the meaning might be how pretty something was, and hence sometimes a pretty picture was art, but the key that made it art was the meaning behind the product.

Several of my friends chimed in that Bob was not one to be argued with. After all, his brain worked on another level than everyone else's. I responded that maybe Bob's brain could translate the works of the Greek gods, but that didn't make Bob a god! In this, I loudly asserted, Bob was wrong!

I don't know where Bob is today, and I suspect he has no memory of our small discussion, but it has crossed my mind more than once in the 31 years since it took place. There is something special about art that makes it more than a simple reproduction. A good portrait is not "good" because it accurately traces every line on a face. A good portrait conveys attitude, personality, and other personal attributes beyond mere photographic reproduction.

We find this same principle in many ancient biographies. The ancients often used words as their portrait canvass, writing in ways beyond simple historical recitation. Consider Plutarch (c. 45-120), a famous writer of antiquity that lived during the time of the New Testament's composition. Plutarch wrote a series of books that we might call "biographies." His goal was not to give a historical accounting of events in the lives, but instead he sought to give a written portrait, definition beyond events. Plutarch set out his subject's lives in parallel arrangement, pairing a Greek with a Roman in an effort to best exemplify the ethical strengths and weaknesses of each. In his introductory comments on his life of Alexander the Great (whom he paired with Julius Caesar), Plutarch explained his method:

For it is not Histories (ιστοριαις) that I am writing, but Lives (βιωαις); and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but makes very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these, to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests.¹

It is worth noting that the translator capitalized the words “Histories” and “Lives.” This is to indicate that these words are formal title designations rather than the normal usage of each. These are different types of literature in ancient Rome. The Histories were more concerned with reciting facts, while the Lives were something more. Lives were efforts to teach and convey responsible messages through examining and dissecting illustrative events and consequences in the subject lives.

As our attention in this class moves to the gospel accounts, this subject becomes relevant. The gospel writers were never writing with the sole purpose of preparing a historical chronology of events. Each gospel writer had a greater goal. Their purposes are discerned in the choices of events related, the ordering of the events, and the manner in which the events are discussed. The gospels are not simply photographic reproductions of history; they are works of art! We are *reading* portraits that grasp different aspects of the work, ministry and life of Christ.

We begin our study with Mark as the gospel that contemporary scholars believe was most likely written first.²

MARK: BACKGROUND

Mark joins Matthew and Luke as the three books scholars label “the synoptic gospels.” They get this label because of the similarities in the stories they tell as

¹ Plutarch, *Lives VII: Alexander and Caesar*, 1. translated by Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard 1919)

² This is the general consensus; however, there are certainly scholars who argue for “Lukan priority,” meaning they think Luke was written first, while others in the early church believed that Matthew was written first. We will delve into this in more depth when we consider the synoptic issues.

well as the language they use. These three gospels are distinguishable from the Gospel of John in that they “see things together,” which is the root meaning of “synoptic.” Where these synoptic gospels see things differently is frequently termed “the synoptic problem,” and it will be the subject of its own lesson. Still, as we look at Mark, we will consider ways it is unique from the other gospels, trying to understand what portrait Mark was working to paint.

Authorship

We attribute this gospel to Mark, even though it does not intrinsically say Mark wrote it. Early church history reports Mark as the author of the gospel, emphasizing that Mark took the task of writing Peter’s stories and recollections.³ The gospel certainly contains indicia of such an arrangement. The stories written pay particular attention to the gestures of Jesus, as would be noticed by Peter or one who was an attentive eyewitness. Mark adds details of Jesus “looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mk 3:5). When Jesus raised Jairus’s daughter from the dead, an event witnessed only by Peter, James, John, Jairus and his wife, the story is detailed that Jesus took the child “by the hand” as he spoke to her in Aramaic saying, “Little girl, arise” (Mk 5:41). In Mark 7:33 we read the detail that as Jesus healed a deaf man, he “put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue.” Similarly he “laid his hands” on the blind man healed at Bethsaida (Mk 8:23) and lifted the boy healed from an unclean spirit after taking him by the hand (Mk 9:27). When Jesus rebuked his disciples for deterring the children from coming to Jesus, Mark detailed that Jesus

³ The early church was unanimous that Mark authored the second gospel, relating Peter’s preaching of gospel. The fuss of the early church was over whether Mark wrote it with Peter’s permission, acquiescence, at Peter’s request, or even after Peter’s death. Thus Papias (c.60-130) wrote that, “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatever he remembered.” Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.14-17. Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215) also confirmed Mark as recording Peter’s proclaimed gospel message, but not at Peter’s request, just with Peter’s awareness. “The Gospel according to Mark had this occasion. As Peter had preached the Word publicly at Rome, and declared the Gospel by the Spirit, many who were present requested that Mark, who had followed him for a long time and remembered his sayings, should write them out. And having composed the Gospel he gave it to those who had requested it. When Peter learned of this, he neither directly forbade nor encouraged it.” Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.5-7. Irenaeus wrote that Mark recorded Peter’s gospel after the death of Peter. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.8. Origen (c.185-c.254) thought that Peter had instructed Mark to write the gospel. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.

Reading Peter’s proclamation of the gospel to Cornelius in Acts 10, certainly lends additional credibility to the historical record. Peter’s presentation reads like a miniature version of the Gospel of Mark in Acts 37ff. Peter began with John the Baptist, as does the Gospel of Mark, ending with Jesus resurrected and appearing to witnesses.

took the children “in his arms and blessed them, laying hands on them” (Mk 10:16).

In addition to these details of Jesus’ gestures, we read a special emphasis in Mark on the actions and role of Peter in the stories. Peter is the first apostle mentioned, although he was called by his Hebrew name “Simon” at the time (Mk 1:16). Peter’s mother-in-law is the first healing story told in Mark (Mk 1:30). Peter leads the early search for Jesus when Jesus has left in the pre-dawn for quiet personal prayer time (Mk 1:35-36). Jesus frequently made Peter’s house in Capernaum his base of operations, and Peter’s house is called “home” in the stories even though it clearly was Peter’s house, not Jesus’ (See, Mk 2:1; compare 3:20f with 3:31f). We are told of Jesus first giving Simon the name “Peter” (Mk 3:16).

We can compare the many times Peter is isolated to the times the reference is made generically to unnamed “disciples.” For example, it is the “disciples” who get asked questions by the scribes and Pharisees about Jesus’ willingness to eat with “sinners.” They are the “disciples” who plucked grain on the Sabbath. It is the twelve who ask Jesus about the meaning of the parables (Mk 4:10f). Contrast those accounts with the quickness with which Peter is identified in events uniquely involving him. In addition to those set out above, we have Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ on the road to Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8:27). In the very next verses, we have Peter’s failure to understand the mission of Christ as Jesus rebukes him for trying to undercut Jesus’ coming sacrifice:

But turning and *seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter* and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man (Mk 8:33).

It is Peter who urges the building of tents after Peter, James and John follow Jesus and witness the mount of transfiguration where Moses and Elijah appear (Mk 9:2ff). After Jesus has his confrontation with the rich young ruler, urging the young man to realize the inadequacy of his self-righteousness (“go, sell all that you have and give to the poor”) that the unnamed “disciples” were amazed, but Peter is singled out for saying, “See, we have left everything and followed you” (Mk 10:28). Peter pointed out the withered fig tree (Mk 11:21). Peter, James, John, and Andrew quiz Jesus about the signs of his coming (Mk 13:3). Mark also relates the story of Peter’s adamancy over his faithfulness followed by the multiple denials before the crowing of the rooster (Mk 14). Jesus’ specific instructions to the women at the tomb are to go tell “the disciples and Peter” that Jesus would be going to Galilee (Mk 16:7).

Sometimes the reference to Peter and Petrine concerns is less obvious. For example, in Mark 7:14-22, Jesus explained that a man is defiled by what is on the inside of him, not by what he eats:

Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled? (Mk 7:19).

It is Mark that adds to this the parenthetical conclusion,

(Thus he declared all foods clean.)

The cleanness of all food, as opposed to those kosher under Old Testament dietary laws, was an issue important to Peter as evidenced both in the Acts accounting of Cornelius's conversion and in Peter's interchange with Paul recounted in Galatians.⁴

Other aspects of Mark's gospel that indicate an eyewitness account is his occasional reference to people by name in situations that make no sense other than identifying people that readers might know. This ties other witnesses to the accounts in ways that can confirm credibility and points of contact. For example, Alexander and Rufus are identified as the sons of Simon of Cyrene who was compelled to carry the cross of Christ for a time (Mk 15:21). Absent being sons of Simon, Alexander and Rufus have no place in the account whatsoever, yet they are named gratuitously in the story.⁵ Similarly, "Simon the leper" is identified as the homeowner in Bethany for Jesus' visit in Mark 14:3 where Jesus was anointed by an unnamed woman with expensive perfume. While not named, scholars have long pointed to Mark 14:51-52 as a masked reference to Mark who, as a young unnamed man, followed Jesus during his arrest and was nearly accosted, fleeing and losing his clothes in the process!

⁴ In Acts 10, the story is told of Peter's role in the first Gentile conversion. The story commences with a vision where Peter is hungry and is told three times to eat food that as a Jew would be considered unclean. Each time Peter responds, "I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." In the vision, a voice responds each time, "What God has made clean, do not call common" (Acts 10:15). In Galatians 2 we read that Paul had to confront Peter over Peter's willingness to eat with Gentiles unless Jews were around. Then Peter would dine only with Jews (and eat only Jewish food). Paul "opposed him to his face" for the hypocrisy. This was doubtless an issue that Peter knew quite well in his later days!

⁵ If Mark is writing this from Rome, as suggested later in this lesson, then it is possible that the Rufus is the same Rufus known to Paul and written about in Romans 16:13, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord."

If we consider Mark as recording Peter's gospel stories, we see other subtle clues that seem to make sense. For example, history teaches that Peter was martyred in Rome, where he served the church in his last years. 1 Peter 5:13 is frequently cited as a passage indicating Peter was in Rome with Mark where it says,

She who is at Babylon [an early church expression for Rome, here "she" likely means the Roman church], who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son.

Mark writing from Rome would explain the many Latin expressions put into Greek in the gospel of Mark. In Mark 4:21 Mark uses the Latin-based word for "basket," (which in Greek becomes *μοδιος*). In Mark 6:27, he uses the Latin for executioner (*σπεκουλατωρ*). In Mark 12:14 we read the Latin-based word for tax or tribute (*κηωσος*). Multiple times in Mark 15, we read Mark using the Latin-based word for centurion (*κεντυριων*).

If Mark was writing from Rome for those with a Latin base, it also explains his little emphasis on Jewish festivals, which, when he did mention, he felt compelled to explain (see, *e.g.*, Mk 14:12). Similarly, whenever Mark gave an Aramaic expression, he always translated it into Greek (see, Mk 5:41; 7:34; 15:22, 34).

Style

Mark's style draws attention for several reasons. Mark does not write with great fluidity; his style is blunt and curt. He moves from event to event quickly and with little fanfare. One of Mark's favorite words is *euthys* (*ευθυς*), meaning "immediately," "straightway," or "forthwith." Mark uses the word 42 times, more than the entire remaining New Testament put together. It helps drive Mark's writing in fast-forward speed. Consider just the first chapter of Mark. When Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends "immediately" (Mk 1:10). Following that, the Spirit "immediately" drove Jesus into the wilderness (Mk 1:12). When Jesus called Peter and Andrew from their nets to fish for men, they left their nets "immediately" (Mk 1:16). As Jesus taught in Capernaum on the Sabbath, "immediately" a man with an unclean spirit cried out calling Jesus the "Holy One of God" (Mk 1:23-24). From there, Jesus "immediately" left the synagogue and entered Peter's house (Mk 1:29). The chapter ends with Jesus declaring a leper "clean" and "immediately" he became clean (Mk 1:42). The entire book reads with this rapid-fire approach.

Reading the narrative in the Greek adds to Mark's active writing because of his usage of certain Greek verb tenses. Mark writes with present and imperfect tenses that stress the present. It is the rough equivalent in English of me saying, "Mark

wrote in these tenses” or saying as I did in the preceding sentence, “Mark writes with ...” It is another way of driving the narrative and giving an impression of an active story in the process of being told. It makes sense as one considers that Mark might have been writing the many events he heard Peter relate, time and time again.

A final note on Mark’s style that scholars have noticed since the earliest writers in the ancient church: Mark was not concerned with lining things up in historical order. Mark’s writings are not like little Russian dolls lined up from large to small. Mark’s writing is more akin to a floral arrangement. He structured and tied his stories together in ways that painted the portrait he chose rather than in a simple chronology. This often perplexes people who expect Mark to write a historical narrative rather than paint a portrait of Christ and his gospel. As one studies Mark for Mark’s purposes, however, the beauty of the portrait takes shape.

MARK: CONTENT

There are a number of ways to consider Mark’s content. One can analyze the differences in material between Mark and the other synoptics. One can consider how readily Mark relates the stories of miracles, yet how relatively few parables he retells. One can discuss the few times Mark relates Jesus actively preaching compared to the messages Jesus delivered through certain encounters and events. One can chart the geography of Mark’s accounts as he spends the most time in Galilee and does not place Jesus in Jerusalem until the very end of the book.

Instead of walking though Mark looking at the content through these lenses, however, we are approaching it through another aspect unique to Mark. Among the gospel writers, Mark most readily records the reactions of people to their encounters with Jesus and his actions. These reactions are set out in clear, unambiguous statements that make them easy to consider. We will look at several:

Astonishment

Five different times Mark records the reactions of people to Jesus as one of astonishment. In Capernaum, Jesus went into the synagogue on a Sabbath. Jesus taught the people, and his teaching was very different than that of their trained teachers. This carpenter Jesus taught “as one who had authority” and this left the people “astonished.” This was new and commanded attention! (Mk 1:21-22) Similarly in Mark 6 we read of Jesus returning to his hometown and entering into the synagogue to teach. “Many who heard him were astonished.” The teaching of Jesus created a buzz as the people asked each other, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by

his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here with him?” This astonishment did not lead to worship, however. It led to cynicism and disbelief. Mark relates that “they took offense at him” and Jesus left, performing few miracles because of their “unbelief.”

In Mark 7:31-37, Jesus healed a man who was both deaf and hindered in speech. Jesus healed the man, restoring his hearing and allowing him to speak “plainly.” At this the people “were astonished beyond measure,” noting Jesus did “all things well.”

The crowds were not the only ones astonished by Jesus. When Jesus had his confrontation with the rich young ruler, Jesus gave a postscript to his disciples explaining, “how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” At this, his disciples were “exceedingly astonished” (Mk 10:24-26). It prompted their question, “Then who can be saved?” Unknown to them at the time, Jesus’ reply was the core gospel message:

With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God (Mk 10:27).

There is an interesting contrast between the chief priests and the people reacting to the actions and teachings of Jesus in Jerusalem. Jesus cleared the temple of the money-changers and those selling sacrificial animals in the courtyard. In conjunction with his actions, Jesus declared that the temple was to be called a house of prayer for all nations, but those with economic interests had turned it into a den of robbers. At this, the people were “astonished at this teaching.” The result on the priests was much different. They “feared him” (Mark 11:15-18).

The contrast sets up a good example of understanding the import of the word “astonished.” The Greek word (εκπλησσω) conveys a reaction that is immediate. We can think of it in American slang as one’s jaw dropping, stunned at what has occurred. The people who saw Jesus heal, who heard Jesus teach, or who observed Jesus speak out and take action against the moneyed interests of the temple were stunned! Their jaws were agape as they tried to sort through what was happening. The power structure was not stunned with amazement; they were struck with fear. What the crowd found amazing, they found intimidating and dangerous! Jesus was not tame and under control!

This brings us to the last usage of this word in Mark. In Mark 16, after the resurrection, two women named Mary come to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ dead body. They do not find Jesus, but instead encounter an angel that instructs them to go tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is coming to Galilee. The women fled the

tomb, “for trembling and astonishment had seized them” (Mk 16:8). They were afraid, and their immediate reaction was to say nothing to anyone. This was the ultimate astonishment – a claim of resurrection from the dead!

Amazement

A word related to astonishment, yet different in the Greek is translated “amazed” (θαμβέω). It too denotes a surprised reaction that left people astounded. Six times Mark writes of those who reacted to Jesus with amazement. In Mark 1:21-28, in the story where people were astonished with Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, a man with an unclean spirit spoke out against Jesus crying,

What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.

Jesus rebuked the spirit and cast him out of the man. This “amazed” the people as they realized Jesus not only taught with authority (which was “astonishing”), but he commanded authority over the demonic world (which was “amazing!”).

This same amazement is expressed when Mark wrote of Jesus healing a paralytic in Mark 2. In that account, Jesus not only exercised healing power, but he spoke forgiveness of sins over the man as well. Some of the scribes reacted with scorn, believing Jesus to be a blasphemer for pronouncing, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus perceived the scorn of the scribes and declared publicly that it is just as easy to declare sins forgiven as to heal. Jesus then does both, showing his authority over disease and sin. The scribes may have been scornful, but the people reacted with amazement, glorifying God as they declared, “We never saw anything like this!” (Mk 2:12).

After Jesus had experienced the transfiguration, he and Peter, James, and John came down from the mountain to find the disciples in the midst of an arguing crowd. When the crowd realized Jesus was in their midst, their arguing ceased and they were “amazed” to see him there. As Jesus unraveled the story, he found out that his disciples had proved unable to cast out a particularly troublesome spirit. Jesus quickly took care of the problem, casting out the spirit and teaching his disciples where they had proved inadequate.

In Mark 10, the rich young ruler story, referred to above under the section on “*Astonishment*,” recounts also the amazement of the disciples over Jesus’ teaching of the difficulty of those with wealth entering the kingdom of heaven. In the account, Mark related not only the amazement and astonishment of the disciples, but he contrasted it with the reaction of the rich, young ruler. The ruler left “sorrowful and disheartened” because his possessions were greater than his desire to follow God.

Later in Mark 10, “amazement” is again manifested among his followers, but this time in conjunction with fear. As Jesus led his followers up to Jerusalem, there was a mixture of fear and amazement among the people. Jesus then pulled his twelve apostles aside and explained to them that he would soon be delivered over, condemned to death, and would rise again after three days.

One last person of note reacted to Jesus with amazement: Pilate! When Jesus was bound up and delivered to Pilate, Pilate cross-examined Jesus,

Are you the King of the Jews?

Jesus replied,

You have said so.

At that point, the chief priests began hurling accusations at Jesus, accusing him of many different things. Jesus remained mute in the face of the accusatorial assault and Pilate asked Jesus for his defense, saying,

Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.

Jesus did not make any further answer. This silence left Pilate amazed. One can reasonably suspect that most everyone in that position with a life or death decision about to be handed down would be making every defense possible. Responding to each charge, maintaining innocence, citing every extraneous circumstance, and begging for his life. Not Jesus. Like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before his shearers is silent, Jesus “opened not his mouth” (Isa. 53:7). Before this silent Jesus, Pilate was amazed!

Fear

A number of people who encountered Jesus reacted with fear. He did not make everyone comfortable; some were scared plain and simple. In Mark 4-5, we read a trilogy of stories where the people reacted with fear. In each, the fear drove the people one direction or another.

When Jesus and his disciples were going across the Sea of Galilee on boats, a storm arose at night. Jesus was asleep at the rear of the boat as the waves were crashing over the front. The boat was filling with water and the disciples were *afraid!* The storm had them fearful of their lives. We should note that a number of the key apostles were fishermen by trade; they were not unaware of how to handle a boat. Nor were they ignorant about when a situation on water was getting out of hand and life threatening. These boat-savvy men were afraid in the midst of

this nighttime storm. They awakened Jesus, asking whether he even cared that they were all about to die. Jesus awoke, and rebuked the wind saying, “Peace! Be still!” The wind and sea immediately obeyed, “and there was a great calm.” As Mark relates the story, at that point the disciples who had before been afraid were now “filled with great fear!” Storms were a natural occurrence that, while causing fear, were at least understandable and in the span of their experience. Jesus was something different altogether. He spoke and the elements responded in a way that was miraculous. They were in the presence of someone like none other (Mk 4:35-41).

Fear drove the disciples into greater reverence and awe of Jesus, but not all fear moved people that way. In contrast to the fearful reaction of Mark 4, Mark 5:1-20 relates the story of Jesus casting the demons out of the “man of the tombs.” This was a man that was so disturbed he could not live around others, could not be held by chains, and was constantly self-mutilating. Jesus healed the man, casting the demons into pigs that rushed over a cliff and drowned in the sea. The townsfolk came out and saw the insane man in his right mind, sitting peacefully with Jesus. The people’s reaction was also one of fear, yet instead of that fear driving them to Jesus, it had the opposite effect. The people begged Jesus to leave them! Regardless of his abilities to heal, to teach, to forgive, these people will go down in history as ones who asked Jesus to leave them! They were too afraid to have him around!

There is one last fear story told in this tight trilogy. After Jesus left the region of the man of the tombs, he was approached by a ruler of the synagogue named Jairus. Jairus has a daughter who was sick to the point of death. He asked Jesus to come and heal her, and Jesus agreed. On the way, Jesus stopped to converse with a woman who had a bleeding disorder healed simply by touching Jesus’ clothes. Putting on hold his mission to heal the daughter of Jairus, Jesus calls this woman his own daughter and declared,

Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease (Mk 5:34).

During this delay, word came to Jairus that his daughter had died. He was told to trouble Jesus no more. Jesus overheard this news and told Jairus,

Do not fear, only believe.

This was the choice Jesus saw: Jairus could react in fear, thinking nothing could be done and letting Jesus go away (a la man of the tombs) or Jairus could trust Jesus and wait for his actions. Jairus chose faith, and it was shortly after that that Jesus raised his daughter from the dead.

The final passage of fear was set out earlier where Mark contrasted the reactions of the ruling priests to those of the crowd over Jesus' teaching. The crowd was stunned; the priests afraid. Their fear drove them to the ultimate crime, killing an innocent man who also happened to be the Son of God!

Miscellaneous Reactions

There are a number of reactions that are given in the context but not labeled with a particular word. In Mark 2:23-28, Jesus and his disciples are walking through a grain field on the Sabbath and the disciples picked grain. The reaction of the Pharisees was a combination of self-righteous criticism and accusation. They pointed out the law and demanded an explanation for the law-breaking eating! Jesus replied with Scripture, exposing the error of their understanding of the law, and then added a final note exposing their improper priorities. The Sabbath was made for man, Jesus explained, not the other way around!

A similar situation moved the people to seek to destroy Jesus, because his compassion, and his words of correction, conflicted with their priorities. It was another Sabbath and Jesus was confronted with a man whose hand was withered. There was again a group looking to accuse Jesus for violating their Sabbath rules and Jesus called them out. He asked whether it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath, whether it was lawful to save a life on the Sabbath? The accusers had no answer, so Jesus healed the man. The Pharisees then went out and "immediately held counsel with the Herodians" on "how to destroy him" (Mk 3:1-6).

In Mark, Jesus repeatedly heals those who were physically deaf, but among the few parables Mark shared in his gospel were the people where Jesus exposed those who were spiritually deaf. In Mark 4, Jesus told the parable of the sower, with seed going onto a path where birds ate it. Other seed fell into rocky soil where it was short-lived. More seed fell into a weeded area where its life was choked out, and a fourth set of seed fell into good soil where it bore great fruit. Jesus urged those with "ears to hear" to hear the message, but it fell largely on deaf ears. The same was true for another parable about hiding a lamp under a basket. The disciples were inquisitive about the meaning of the parables and Jesus explained them accordingly. But for those who were not interested, Jesus noted they had eyes, but were blind, ears, but were deaf. They would not turn to the kingdom.

Even as Jesus was not followed, those who challenged him were still stunned over his wisdom. In Mark 12:13-17, Jesus was confronted by a group sent specifically to trap him and get him in trouble with the authorities. The Pharisees and Herodians planned this trap in advance, and sent some disingenuous actors to pretend to follow Jesus. These actors came in and declared to Jesus before others,

Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God.

See how carefully Mark laid out the fakeness of these actors? They followed this obsequious garbage with the trap:

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?

Mark noted that though Jesus saw through their hypocrisy, Jesus stayed with their question as he made his point. Jesus called for them to bring a tax coin. They brought a denarius. Jesus asked whose face and inscription was on the coin and they said, "Caesar's." Jesus then told them to give Caesar what belonged to Caesar," then adding the important, "and give to God the things that are God's!" The actors lost this round. They would have to report back to those who sent them that the plan failed. But they were not unimpressed! This carpenter had outplayed them all, and they "marveled at him."

Faith

A final reaction is an important one, in part because it was unlikely, and also because of its truth. In Mark 15, 21-41 we read of the crucifixion and death of Jesus. As Jesus hung on the cross dying, he was taunted by those who mocked his seeming inability to save himself. Those crucified with him reviled him as well. The chief priests and scribes mocked him as they reveled in their apparent victory over this troublemaker. Darkness descended over the land for three hours and finally, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus uttered a loud cry, breathed his last breath, and died. The temple curtain was torn, from the top down to the bottom. One man, a Roman centurion charged with overseeing the event stood facing Jesus. As Jesus breathed his last, this pagan man responded in faith:

Truly this man was the Son of God (Mk 15:39).

This response was not that of the priests, the scribes, the loud and taunting audience at the gruesome scene. But the man who had likely seen many bear this typical Roman punishment saw something he had never seen before. He was moved to faith.

CONCLUSION

As we read and study the gospels, we will see over and over that the writers have given us portraits of Jesus. In Mark's portrait of Jesus, we not only see Jesus, but we see the reactions of those around him. Mark's portrait is critical of many people, but particularly the disciples. The disciples never seem to understand Jesus or his mission. Mark repeatedly makes the point that the disciples, including the chosen twelve, are clueless as Jesus spoke about his death and resurrection. There are some great proclamations of faith in Mark, but not by the disciples! The demons repeatedly pronounce Jesus is the Son of God. The centurion declared Jesus was the Son of God. But the best the disciples can muster is Peter's proclamation of Jesus as Anointed ("Messiah"), but not as the Son of God! And even in that chapter, Peter follows it by not understanding Jesus and his mission calling forth the response "Get behind me Satan!"

Peter pledged support, but denied Jesus; the disciples all ran in fear; and one unnamed disciple (Mark himself?) ran away naked--his fear and shame exposed. It seems not to have been till after the coming of the Holy Spirit that things really become clear and Peter gains his courage. If this is Peter's way of remembering his time with Jesus and his way of preaching to followers of Jesus as he travelled in Rome and elsewhere, then he must have been very humbled by his mistakes, and his message must have been very compelling to his audiences.

These reactions mirror many of us today. We can see Jesus and react in fear. We can be amazed and astonished. We can ignore him and drive him away from our lives. We can even get angry and defensive, trying to outwit him.

The right reactions, of course, are those that move us to faith, to praise and worship, and even to a healthy fear, as we seek to follow him who leads us to life.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it"* (Mk. 8:35).

As we react to Jesus there is much to react to. His teachings stir up reactions as he puts the real claim on our life. How do we react to this claim? Is there anything we value more highly than the Lord and his direction for us? That is what we have to set aside. We can ignore it, but is that really the right response? One of the saddest parts of Jesus' teaching is the final word on this subject. Jesus declared that there were some standing before him who would not taste death before they saw the kingdom of God coming in his glory. Jesus did not mean some would live physically until the second coming. He meant that some would ignore his call to lose their

life for his sake. They would greedily grasp their own life rather than give it up to God.

2. *“They all ate and were satisfied”* (Mk. 6:42).

Those who followed Jesus were hungry. There wasn't nearly enough food to go around. The apostles wanted to send people off to buy their own food, but Jesus chose instead to feed them. With five loaves and two fish, Jesus had the people sit in groups of hundreds and fifties. Having given thanks for the food, he fed them all, with twelve baskets of scraps left over. The people were satisfied.

The reaction of Jesus to the real needs of the people was immediate and practical. He did not offer only emotional or spiritual solace. He went out of his way to meet physical needs fully.

This is a good chance for us to realize that he gives us each day, our daily bread. He calls us to pray for that with the promise he will meet our needs. May we set our needs before him on a daily basis and may we praise him for the ways he meets those needs.

3. *“And immediately Judas came...and he kissed him.”* (Mk. 14:43, 45).

The immediacy of Mark's writing cries out to us in ways beyond driving the narrative and storyline. It drives us to recognize the immediacy of every moment. Life goes by too fast. Days may be long, but the years are short. Every moment we miss alignment with God's will and purposes are moments gone forever. God can still work with Plan B (or C, D, or even Z), but why would we not seize each moment to respond to God with humble and obedient hearts? Looking for each moment to praise and serve him!