



# **FOCUS ON MARK**

**a study guide for  
groups & individuals**

revised edition

**by  
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# *Introduction to the Focus Series*

The Focus Bible Study Series offers a unique and inviting way to interact with and experience God's word, allowing that word to filter into every area of life. It is designed to challenge growing Christians to explore scripture and expand their understanding of God's call. Each volume echos the **Living the Good News** strategy of experiential learning; that is, they welcome the participant into a journey of discovery.

## **Journal Format**

Focus Bible Studies are adaptable for individual use or group use. Adult classes, small-faith communities, midweek Bible studies and neighborhood discussion groups will find these books a helpful resource for in-depth exploration, personal growth and community building. When used in a group, leadership may be designated or shared.

Each of the book's twelve sections begins with a brief synopsis of the passage and a *Find the Facts* section, which can help you prepare to consider the material. Informative commentary is not intended to provide definitive answers to the meaning of the passage, but to give you background information, clues to the context and suggestions for thought. It can serve as a point of departure for personal reflection or group discussion.

The questions posed in each section are designed to engage the reader at a variety of levels:

- Some are questions of *interpretation*: What is the author's meaning in this passage?
- Some are questions of *application*: How does the author's message apply to contemporary Christianity?
- Some are questions of *reflection*: How is this God's message to me? to my family? to our community?

Every level contributes to the faith-nurturing impact of the study. The variety of questions are grouped together topically so that you can respond to the level most directly pertaining to your situation. The same goes for group use: participants can respond to those questions most relevant to their current circumstance.

Each section includes suggested *Group Activities*. These activities provide small groups with experiential activities that can help participants to grasp an idea through various methods of learning rather than through intellect alone. These activities involve the whole person—senses, emotions, mind and spirit. If you are using this study in a group setting, we encourage you to incorporate these activities into your group’s time together. Many adults may feel awkward when invited to work with clay or pipe cleaners, or to create songs or poetry; they may feel these are childish activities. Such concrete experiences, however, can serve to move group members from learning *about* an idea toward an *understanding* of the idea.

Each section closes with a *Journal Meditation* and a *Stepstone to Prayer*. These offer you the opportunity to record or illustrate thoughts and feelings about the passage explored and to express these to God in prayer. The *Journal Meditation* invites you into deep, personal reflection that can produce life-changing understanding. *Stepstone to Prayer* leads you into a time of communion with God.

## Individual Use

- Begin each session with prayer—that you will be open to God’s message to you, that the Spirit will illuminate God’s work, and that you will be empowered to follow God’s call.
- Read the passage several times in the scripture translation of your choice. (Note that the New Revised Standard Version Bible has been used in the preparation of these studies.) Try to understand what the author is saying before you begin to interpret, apply or reflect on the message.
- Note key words or phrases that you find especially significant in the scripture. When you have finished a section, go back and review these words or phrases and explore their importance in light of your greater understanding of the passage.

- Spread your exploration of any given section over several days; come back to those questions that have provoked considerable thought. You may be surprised at the new insights you find if you spend some time each day on the passage. Give the passage time to sink into your heart and mind.
- Record your thoughts in the space provided. The discipline of journaling can help you synthesize your thoughts and direct your understanding.

## Small Group Use

- Prepare for each gathering following the suggestions given above under “Individual Use.” Group interaction is impoverished if participants have not immersed themselves in the passage before meeting.
- Begin your time together with prayer. Expect God to increase your faith, expand your understanding of scripture and build your fellowship.
- Accept one another’s experiences and interpretations of the passage. Listen carefully to comments; offer your own insights; be willing to look at things in new ways.

## Small Group Leadership

- Prepare for each gathering as a participant first. Your role as a leader is not to teach but to facilitate the process of sharing and discovery for everyone.
- Keep in mind the group’s time restraints. Begin and end on time. Underline those questions that you think will be most appropriate for your group’s discussion time, but be open to those questions that group members wish to pursue.
- Choose one or two group activities that your group will enjoy and learn from. Make sure you have gathered any required materials for your chosen group activities.
- Begin and close each gathering with prayer. Ask a volunteer to read each section of the passage as you come to it in the study.

- Welcome all contributions, but keep the discussion on track. Certain passages may have two or three possible interpretations. Do not be concerned if all participants do not agree in their understanding. Acknowledge the differences of opinion and move on to the next question.
- Allow time at the end of each gathering for those individuals who wish to share their thoughts or drawings from their *Journal Meditations*.
- If your group members are not well-acquainted, it may take some time to build trust within the group. Let the dynamics of the group develop as group members gain confidence in themselves and in one another.



# *Introduction to the Gospel of Mark*

The Gospel of Mark *moves*. Mark plunges headlong into the ministry of Jesus—no fancy introduction, no opening theology, no Christmas story. The action is fast and furious, with events tumbling on each other’s heels. “Immediately, immediately, immediately” repeats Mark in his opening verses. The time is now; the message has come. Mark pulls his readers into the healing, teaching, delivering ministry of Jesus.

The Jesus of Mark’s gospel is a man of action, healing diseases, stilling storms, feeding crowds, exorcising demons, forgiving sins, leaving behind a trail of amazed believers and dazed opponents. In this gospel, Jesus seldom stops long to preach or teach; another village beckons, another hurting believer cries out for healing, every morning brings a fresh opportunity to serve.

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest, simplest and most concise of the gospels. In Mark we find the “basic gospel,” possibly honed and sharpened to be used in catechesis in the early Church. Understandably, then, a large percentage of the gospel—over a third—covers the critical events of the final week of Jesus’ life. These events stand at the heart of Christian faith and life.

## **Author and Date**

The author of the Gospel of Mark cannot be identified with certainty. As with the other gospels, the book itself offers no identification. However, both early Church tradition and selected verses from the New Testament suggest a likely candidate—a man by the name of John Mark. Acts refers to John Mark as the son of Mary, a woman within

whose house the early Church met in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). John Mark appears again in Colossians 4:10, identified as the cousin of Barnabas.

Both Barnabas and John Mark travel with Paul on his first missionary journey to Cyprus and Galatia. For unknown reasons, Paul and Mark have a falling out and Mark leaves part way through the trip. The fight is serious enough so that even Barnabas declines to join Paul on his second tour when Paul refuses to allow Mark to accompany them again.

Mark appears later in the New Testament in letters written by Paul from prison in Rome. By this time the wound between them has healed; Paul refers to Mark as his “fellow worker” (Philem. 24) and “useful in my ministry” (2 Tim. 4:11). Mark apparently ministers to Paul while Paul is imprisoned.

Mark’s appearance in Rome toward the end of Paul’s known ministry also links Mark to the apostle Peter. Tradition places both Peter and Mark ministering together in Rome while Paul writes from a Roman prison. Mark, it is thought, remembered and organized the sermons of Peter, arranging them into what is now known as the Gospel of Mark. Thus, a more appropriate title for the book could be “Peter’s Gospel.” A comparison of the structure of Mark with the sermons of Peter in Acts lends credence to this theory; Peter’s typical sermon and Mark’s gospel begin with John’s baptism and end with the resurrection. Mark presents the “basic gospel” in his book just as Peter presented the “basic gospel” each time he preached.

Although filled with strong Jewish elements, the Gospel of Mark focuses on Gentile believers as its target audience. For example, Mark takes time to explain Jewish customs and translates Aramaic words already familiar to Jews. Mark stresses the need to bear up beneath persecution and martyrdom, relevant matters for Roman believers toward the end of the first century.

Much has been invested in the attempt to date Mark’s gospel. Many scholars see Mark’s gospel as the precursor to those of Matthew and Luke, with whom Mark shares a great deal of material. If Matthew and Luke relied on the recollections of Peter as recorded by Mark, the Gospel of Mark probably dates from A.D. 50–65. Other scholars theorize

that all three gospel writers relied on one or more other, unidentified sources. Mark may then be dated a decade or so later, from A.D. 60–70. The evidence in this matter remains inconclusive. In either case, the Gospel of Mark would have been read and reread by many people who had witnessed firsthand the events he describes.

## Structure

Here is a simple outline of the Gospel of Mark:

Mark 1:1-13—Jesus’ ministry begins.

Mark 1:14-9:50—Jesus ministers in and around Galilee.

Mark 10:1-52—Jesus journeys to Jerusalem.

Mark 11:1-13:37—Jesus ministers in Jerusalem.

Mark 14:1-15:37—Jesus suffers and dies.

Mark 16:1-20—Jesus rises to new life.

## Themes

The Gospel of Mark presents Jesus as the suffering servant, ready to face persecution, rejection and alienation to obey his heavenly Father. And those who follow Jesus—those who aspire to discipleship—must also suffer for his sake and the sake of others. “Who will be greatest?” ask the disciples. “The one who is a slave to the others,” answers Jesus. And more clearly than in any of the other gospels, Jesus carries that teaching to its ultimate expression. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (10:45).

The cross figures prominently in Mark’s gospel. Mark takes pains to balance both the human contribution to and the divine need for Jesus’ death on the cross. Mark 14:1 offers an example of human involvement in the crucifixion: “The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him...” Mark 8:31 offers an ex-

ample of God's intention: "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." God prepares Jesus to die on the cross; humanity nails him there.

Mark also carefully balances the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. Of all the gospels, Mark offers the most emotional and human picture of Christ. In Mark more than the other gospels, Jesus is moved, filled with compassion, tired out, amazed, touched and angered. In stories where Luke and Matthew soften Jesus' human side, Mark describes Jesus in terms that we might use to describe ourselves; for example, in Mark the Holy Spirit "drives" Jesus into the wilderness (1:12) while in Matthew the Spirit "leads" Jesus (4:1). Despite these frequent references to Jesus' humanity, Mark also points out Jesus' divinity—unclean spirits worship Jesus (3:11; 5:7), God calls Jesus the Son (9:7), and Jesus refers to himself as the Father's Son (13:32).

Though Mark focuses less on Jesus' teaching and more on action, as noted above, he does not neglect the importance of Jesus' teaching ministry. Mark applies the words *teacher*, *teach* or *teaching* to Jesus nearly forty times. While fewer of Jesus' actual teachings are recorded, Jesus is clearly recognized as a remarkable teacher.

Mark also tends to shroud Jesus' role as the Messiah in secrecy, waiting for the final week of Jesus' life to announce Jesus' identity as the Christ. For example, just prior to the final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus tells his followers not to tell anyone what they had seen until he had risen from the dead (9:9).

This, then, is the Gospel of Mark: fast-paced, detailed, essential. Mark invites us to join the march and walk with Jesus, the Messiah. We watch as Jesus heals, listen as he teaches, struggle side-by-side with him in the quest for wholeness and love, endure persecution and opposition, and, finally, join him at the cross as he purchases our salvation. Welcome to Mark, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

# Mark 1

## *The Way of the Lord*

**J**ohn the Baptist bursts on the scene after the prophetic voice in Israel had been silent for four hundred years. He challenges his people to prepare a way in their hearts in the same way that people in the Orient made the road smooth for a visiting king. John urges the people to take away the barriers and the rough places, and to make the way of the Lord a smooth entrance. This is not a one-time preparation but a continual readiness and maintenance program. John the Baptist calls for a spiritual discovery: a tough-minded awareness of our failure to measure up to God's will and a radical change of heart, determining to follow God's will more closely.

Moving through the first days of Jesus' ministry in chapter 1, we see the forces that the Lord will encounter when he comes on the path into our hearts. There will be religious objections, resistance to change, family resentments, emotional distress and physical symptoms that erect huge barriers to the coming of the Lord.

Read through all of the book at one sitting, if possible. This creates the sense of drama and awe that Mark wishes to communicate. Then reread Mark 1.

### **Find The Facts**

What prophet does Mark quote? What does John preach? What does John say about Jesus? What does Jesus preach? Whom does Jesus call

to be his disciples? What examples of Jesus' power does Mark include? How does Jesus teach? What does Jesus say is the reason he came?

## Consider:

1. *List the kinds of people, powers and attitudes that Jesus encounters in the first chapter. What contemporary name can you give to each of them?*
2. *Note the word immediately wherever you find it in the text. What impression do you think Mark wishes to create? Why?*
3. *Read Isaiah 40:1-11. Compare Isaiah's message with John's. What more can be understood about John's message and Jesus' identity from Isaiah?*

## Mark 1:1-8

John cries out, announcing the arrival of the Messiah. John's ministry is one of preparation, calling people to repentance, baptism, confession and forgiveness—the elements of our own preparation for encountering the living God. There is no other way than this “repentance road” on which the King is able to enter the hearts of his people. Confession and forgiveness remove the barriers that obstruct the King's embrace of love.

To *baptize*, (Gk., *baptizo*) literally means “to dip in” or “immerse,” implying also “to wash clean.” John invites the people of Israel to be cleansed from sin by repentance, turning away from old ways and moving in the opposite direction.

*Confession*, which means “to agree with someone else,” involves the open acknowledgment of the truth about our sin—to ourselves, to God and perhaps to another person. Confession specifically names the offensive behavior, recognizes its darkness and brings a disciplined effort to turn away from it. John hears the people's confessions before the people are immersed in the water. He searches their attitudes and questions their behavior (Lk. 3:7-17). This verbalizing is the outward show of their repentance, which makes them candidates for baptism. Confession does more than recognize sin; it agrees with God about sin's seriousness.

John's attire and lifestyle clearly indicate his role, for they echo Elijah's protest against the superficial and materialistic lives of his contemporaries (2 Kg. 1:7-8). Though John attracts many by his powerful message, he has come not to gather people to himself but to “prepare the way of the Lord” (Jn. 1:19-27). Jesus far surpasses John, as John certainly recognizes. Only the lowest of slaves would remove a person's sandals, one of the most menial and humble of tasks.





## Mark 1:9-13

Jesus' arrival at John's place of ministry signals the beginning of his own ministry. As the people seek God, Jesus joins them in an act of complete identification. He goes down into the Jordan with these admitted sinners and submits to the same baptism. Though he has no need for repentance or forgiveness, the first step in his mission of atonement (2 Cor. 5:21) involves the decision to associate himself fully with the human condition (Mt. 3:15).

This act leads first to affirmation from God; it expresses perfectly Jesus' identity as God's Son. It also leads to a time of severe testing, the narrow, spiritual pathway that continues the repentance road. Before Jesus can reach out effectively to others in their sin, illness and spiritual perversity, he first must face his own temptations to minister in ways other than his humble, loving, forgiving, suffering-with-others style.

### Consider:

- 7. What does Jesus' baptism reveal about the nature of his ministry? In what ways does Jesus' baptism define his calling from God? What does our baptism reveal about our ministry and calling?*
  
- 8. In what ways do you think God's voice and the descent of the Spirit prepare Jesus for his wilderness experience? What part do wilderness experiences play in maturing us as Christians?*

## Mark 1:14-20

Jesus' public ministry begins as he preaches the gospel (literally, "good news") of the nearness of God's kingdom. This kingdom is not some far-off place or event, but an open door through which any person may enter by repenting and believing. The time is ripe; the decisive moment (Gk., *kairos*) has begun a new epoch.

In this new season, Jesus invites people to move from the empty obedience of ceremonialism to a fellowship based on sacrificial love. Some hear this good news gladly and follow Jesus. The word *follow* literally means to "walk the same road." It implies fellowship, joint-participation and a side-by-side experience with another. Jesus' leadership is not one of distant direction, but of intimate sharing in the joys and trials of a common path. That path, however, transforms those who walk on it. Following Jesus entails submitting to his revolutionary call.

### Consider:

9. *Why do you think Jesus chooses these four men as his first disciples? What qualifications do they have? What qualifications do they lack? On what basis do we often accept or reject fellow disciples?*

*10. Are all Christians called to be “fishers of men”? Why or why not? To what other parts of the fishing-for-people enterprise might you be called? setting the sail? steering? washing the nets and decks? throwing the net? What does this passage say about the way we become Jesus’ disciples?*

## **Mark 1:21-28**

Capernaum stood at the crossroads of a key caravan route at the northern end of Lake Galilee. In the synagogue of this busy town, people gathered for prayer, praise and the reading and interpretation of scripture. The Greek indicates that Jesus teaches at some length, and his teaching is like being “struck hard by a fist.” The people are utterly amazed by what Jesus says and the way he says it. He teaches with authority, unlike the scribes who teach by quoting a tangle of regulations made by other rabbis. Jesus explains the inner law of the Spirit based on compassion and human worth.

Mark juxtaposes the power of Jesus’ words with the power of Jesus’ works. Jesus first displays this power and compassion to a man with an unclean spirit in a place of worship and teaching. One wonders what this man was like before Jesus’ teaching and what there is about Jesus that brings this spirit out into the open.

In Jesus’ day people quickly recognized the reality and power of evil spirits and demons. Strange and aberrant behavior, pathological and

some physical illnesses were considered a result of evil spiritual powers. The earth was a frightening place, a hell, where every life situation was ruled by these demonic spirits. Archaeologists have uncovered thousands of skulls with holes drilled in them that show growth after the drilling. Such drilling was thought to release evil spirits from the head. Jesus' authority over this demon amazes the people, for only God has control in this dark arena.

## Consider:

*11. For what reasons might the first event of Jesus' public ministry and the first display of resistance have happened in a synagogue? What might this say about Jesus' work today?*

*12. What is the significance of a demon's recognition of Jesus? of Jesus' response to the demon? What words today are sometimes used to refer to demon possession?*

13. *What does Mark imply about the scribes' teaching? How does Jesus' teaching differ from contemporary preaching and teaching?*

## **Mark 1:29-39**

Here, at the beginning of history's central event—the advent of Jesus Christ—Mark records the healing of a mother-in-law. Mark sandwiches this event between the exorcising of a demon in the midst of Jewish worship and huge crowds bringing other demon-possessed and physically ill people. Peter's mother-in-law shows the proper response to Jesus' touch: service prompted by gratitude and devotion.

What Jesus has done in the synagogue spreads like a firestorm. The people could hardly wait for the Sabbath to end, as signaled by the first three visible stars. So at sunset, a flood of people come to Jesus, carrying or leading their sick, confused and maimed friends and family members. With compassion and power Jesus responds. Many can speak with a semblance of power, but few are able to follow through with deeds of power. Jesus produces results.

After telling of the first busy day of Jesus' ministry, Mark now shows us the secret of Jesus' effectiveness—solitude and prayer. In his baptism, Jesus identifies with people who are aware of their separation from God and who desire to return. Only Jesus' consistent, personal, spiritual practice of spending hours alone with the Father can sustain him in his mission of identification and atonement.

After the time of quiet, Jesus is ready to abandon the immediate adulation of the crowds (1:37) in order to fulfill his greater calling. Everyone indeed is searching for Jesus.

## Consider:

14. *Compare today's Church members to the crowds that were attracted to Jesus. How would you characterize Jesus' style of ministry? How might this be adapted to your church's ministry in the world?*

15. *Describe your spiritual practice. Name your lonely place. In what ways does the time you spend with God prepare and empower you for service?*

16. *What do you think Jesus' followers want him to do in verse 37? Why? What form do you think this voice takes in the Church today? What kind of confidence enables Jesus to leave the success at Capernaum?*

## Mark 1:40-45

The Greek word for *leprosy* does not necessarily mean the disease we now identify by that name (also known as Hansen's Disease). A variety of skin diseases went by the name "leprosy" and were the most dreaded of all diseases.

In ancient cultures, illnesses and misfortune were seen as a punishment from God and/or the work of evil powers. Such affliction was believed to be a result of the sin committed by the sufferer or his or her parents. The terror of leprosy lay in the diminished physical changes that inevitably came and in the social and spiritual rejection associated with it. The leper lived apart from the community and, when encountering other people, yelled out "Unclean! Unclean!" so that others could avoid contact. Worst of all, no leper could participate in worship or join the community in any religious activities. No one had less dignity or hope than a leper.

By calling out for help, coming close and kneeling at Jesus' feet, this leper breaks the law. When Jesus reaches out and touches him, he, too, breaks the Levitical law. Jesus obeys instead the higher law of a compassionate heart. By cleansing this man's disease, Jesus reconciles the leper to his community and to God. The priest's declaration of ritual cleanliness reinstates the outcast in his family and in the society. The theologically trained scribes wonder how Jesus can supersede God's wrath and punishment (3:22, 30).

### Consider:

17. *What faith and doubt does the leper experience? How is this like your own faith and doubt?*

18. How does the leper benefit by showing himself to the priest? How does the community benefit? What might this say about the ministry goals of the Church today?

## Group Activities

1. Divide into groups of three and invite group members to share the event and circumstances of their own baptisms. Encourage them to tell about the location, their age, social circumstances and personal meaning of the event.  
Discuss:
  - How does your baptism compare with Jesus' baptism?
2. Dramatize Jesus' wilderness temptation. Invite people to roleplay *Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Satan, the wild beasts and the angels*. Read 1:9-13 phrase by phrase and let the roleplayers express what they imagine and feel. Dramatize and discuss any insights that came to them.
3. Review Mark 1 and ask group members to cite the various encounters that Jesus is having with people. List them on chalkboard, whiteboard or newsprint.  
Discuss:
  - Who takes the initiative in each situation?
  - What is the outcome of each situation?

Divide into groups, asking each group to choose a situation from this passage to present as a "frozen frame." Ask them to discuss privately the encounter that they wish to dramatize without words or movement, frozen as in a still photograph. Have the groups watch each presentation and guess which encounter is being depicted. Discuss:



- What is the effect on you of Mark's clipped and hurried style of telling Jesus' story?
  - In what ways does focusing on Jesus' individual encounters enhance or detract from Mark's overall account in this passage?
4. Invite group members to brainstorm some human conditions and taboos that cause people to be as ostracized and feel as unacceptable as lepers did in Jesus' day. Discuss:
- When have you felt like a leper?
  - Who or what are we expected not to touch?
  - Name a taboo that your compassion has caused you to break.
  - What groups today are treated like lepers (e.g., AIDS victims)?

## Journal Meditation

For a moment close your eyes and imagine a road that stretches out before you for miles. It is a rough road, with hills and gullies, dangerous barriers and deep holes. God is coming to you down this road, but is having a difficult time reaching you. Let the Holy Spirit show you the road hazards of your life. What must you remove? What must you level and fill in? What crooked places need to be straightened out? What must be bridged in order to prepare the way of the Lord? After a few minutes of quiet meditation, write down or illustrate what has occurred to you.

### Stepstone to Prayer

*Lord, if you are willing, you can make me...*