

In Christ: The Son of Man

Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Introduction

Each of the Gospels is unique in that each tells the story of Jesus and the arrival of the kingdom of God from a different angle. But Mark is *really* different! It's the most mystifying of the four Gospels. It begins with everything going really well and everything unravels from there. The disciples begin faithfully following Jesus, but only get more confused by him as it goes on, and by the end, they completely abandon him. And there's even more failure: when the young man at the empty tomb instructs the women to tell Jesus' disciples and Peter that he is alive and will meet them in Galilee, they fail to do so because they're afraid. And that's how it ends!

And there are more baffling elements to this Gospel. It's as if Mark failed out of Gospel-writing school. All of the confusing aspects of the Gospel work together to send the message to Christian audiences that perhaps they don't know Jesus and the character of the kingdom of God as they think they do. And the one central reality that they're failing to grapple with is the cross-shaped character of the gospel. The cross challenges everything about us—our desires for success, possessions, prestige, power, control, and self-protection. It's so easy for us to bend and distort our Christian identity so that it is comfortable, and Mark wants to make us very uncomfortable as we hear the story of Jesus and come to grips with the truth about him and his mission.

- (1) **Jesus as the Son of God.** As God's Son, Jesus represents God himself and *is* God himself. He is the creator God, with authority over creation, and he is the covenant God of Israel, returning to his people to gather them together and restore them to himself.

Jesus is introduced right away in Mark 1:1 as the Son of God. And his identity as the Son of God appears at three key points in the Gospel—the beginning, middle, and end. At his baptism, the heavens are torn open and Jesus hears God declare, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (1:10-11). In the middle of the Gospel, when he is on the mountain with his disciples, Jesus is transfigured—revealed with the glory he will receive in the future. God again declares, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (9:7). And at the end, when the centurion saw how he died, he declared, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

One interesting feature of Mark is that, apart from God and the centurion, the only other figures in the narrative that identify Jesus as the Son of God are demons. This may be one of Mark's devices to show that Jesus' identity is hidden, or is only discerned through careful attention to who Jesus really is.

As God, Jesus has authority to forgive sins (2:1-12).

As God, Jesus has authority over creation (4:1-2). In chapters 4-8, Jesus and the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee several times. This is not merely a detail that sets the scene. "The sea" in the ancient world represented the forces of chaos that threaten to tear apart God's good creation. So the sea crossings, and Jesus' calming the storms, point to his authority over creation. He speaks to it, and it responds.

The detail that begins chapters 4-8 in 4:1 is important to set this all in motion. The Greek of Mark 4:1 notes that Jesus “got into a boat to sit on the sea.” That strikes translators as clunky, so they render it, like the NIV, “he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake.” After all, who sits on the sea!?

Ancient hearers would pick this up immediately. Many psalms portray the creator God as “enthroned above the waters” (Psalm 29:10). That is, God reigns as king over the forces of chaos. Psalm 29 celebrates God’s sovereignty over chaos by portraying his voice thundering over the sea, as God is powerfully reminding the forces of chaos that he is their rightful ruler.

As God, Jesus receives worship. Mark 5 portrays several characters who see or hear Jesus and run to him and bow down in the posture of worship.

- (2) **Jesus as the Son of Man.** This title has several resonances, some of which call on Old Testament roles that Jesus embodies and performs in Mark’s Gospel.
- a. The true human. Jesus lives the truly human life that God had always wanted for humanity. He serves the needy and welcomes the socially marginalized. And he goes the way of the cross, serving others rather than himself.
 - b. Suffering now / glory later. The title “Son of Man” is used in Daniel 7 to refer to a figure to whom God delegates authority to rule. In Mark, this is what Jesus is destined for in the future. The present, however, is a time of suffering in solidarity with creation and with the suffering of God’s people, living in occupied territory. And in the present, Jesus must go to the cross and be put to death. Suffering now is the only way to receive the glory of the kingdom in the future, and to share in Jesus’ rule over creation. The disciples want glory *now*, but Jesus calls them to join him on the way of the cross.
 - c. God’s prophet. “Son of man” is also the way that God refers to the prophet Ezekiel. That Jesus bears this title in Mark indicates that Jesus plays a prophetic role to God’s people. He confronts the powerful in chapters 11-12, and throughout the Gospel, he is associated with or mistaken for Elijah or one of the prophets. The prophets routinely called out the economic and political injustices of Israel as they neglected to care for the poor, the orphan, and the widow. And Jesus does the same in Mark. This is a powerful reminder to those whose lives are marked by comfort in our time that God is on the side of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed, and that serving and welcoming them ought to be a massive priority for us.
- (3) **Jesus as authoritative teacher.** In Mark, Jesus is an authoritative teacher. This is obvious in some ways, such as when God declares to the disciples at Jesus’ transfiguration, “listen to him!” But other instances are a bit more mysterious. For example, Mark 1:21-28:

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to **teach**. The people were amazed at his **teaching**, because he **taught** them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new **teaching**—and with authority! He even

gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Notice how many times Mark repeats words for teaching. He’s obviously emphasizing Jesus as teacher, yet there’s no teaching in this episode, nor anywhere around it. The episode portrays an exorcism. In fact, in Mark, Jesus is often called “teacher” or “rabbi,” but there’s very little of Jesus’ teaching in this Gospel.

Mark is likely written to Christian audiences, those who know Jesus’ teaching, but who aren’t following it as they should be. They are not serving the poor and welcoming the socially marginalized into their fellowships to care for them. Mark is pointing them back to Jesus’ teaching and calling on them to take a closer look so they don’t neglect the heart of what Jesus has called them to do.

- (4) **Jesus as cruciform king of the cross-shaped kingdom of God**. In Mark, Jesus calls disciples to take up their crosses and follow him on the way to the cross. The kingdom of God is a cross-shaped kingdom in which inhabitants of it do not seek their own enrichment, but serve one another and give themselves and their resources to others and to one another.

The scene in which Roman soldiers mock and beat Jesus is a dark and subversive portrayal of the same sorts of things that took place when a new Caesar was crowned (15:16-20). They acclaim him king and put a crown on his head, and they bow down to him. Then he is led out and lifted up on the cross to be crucified.

This is critical in that we are to see that Jesus reigns over his cross-shaped kingdom from the place of the cross. He is a cruciform ruler and his people are to live in cruciform modes of life that faithfully portray the kind of king he is. We don’t seek power or prestige or honor or higher social status. We love and serve one another, and regard the very least as central to God’s kingdom.

Practice: Silence

One of the striking features of Mark is that Jesus keeps instructing people to keep quiet about him or about a miracle he has performed. He does this almost a dozen times! It’s so off-putting to continually read this as a modern American shaped by public relations and social media. Doesn’t Jesus want to spread the word? Shouldn’t we tell as many people as possible? What about promoting the amazing reality of the arrival of the Son of God into the world!?

For Mark, our first priority is to **hear** and to **see** and to move toward understanding. The reality of Jesus and his mission is too great for us to easily grasp, and we likely don’t understand him like we think we do. This requires that we be silent, to listen, to learn, to reflect. With Bartimaeus, we may pray, “Rabbi, I want to see” (10:51). And we can wait in silence as God gradually opens our eyes.