

The Surprising Kingdom

The Gospel of Mark

It's been a great Easter season at Harvest! We felt the weight of our sin as we studied the book of Amos, and then enjoyed a glorious celebration of hope and new life on resurrection Sunday. Now, it's time to gather as a church and take a long walk with Jesus. He'll teach us what it means to follow him into the new life he gives us as we read the Gospel of Mark.

What is the Gospel of Mark?

The Gospels are the first four books of the New Testament. These are four separate accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, including information on what Jesus taught and why all of this matters. Each Gospel is named after its author and each was written with a particular 1st century audience in mind.

The Gospel we're studying was written by Mark (also known in the Bible as "John Mark"), who based his account of Jesus largely on the eyewitness testimony of the Apostle Peter. As one of Jesus' closest disciples, Peter went everywhere with him and saw everything he did during his years of ministry. So Peter was an ideal person to teach people about Jesus after his death and resurrection. Mark travelled with Peter for a time and served as his scribe, writing down the things Peter was teaching so that they would endure long after he died. Thanks to that, we have access to Peter's direct eyewitness account of Jesus' life and teachings today as we read the Gospel of Mark.



What's in Mark's Gospel?

Mark's record of Jesus' life and teachings is characterized by energy, tension, and movement toward the final goal. We see Jesus living a life that was shaped by a clear mission. To follow him is to become increasingly mission-driven ourselves. Mark's account divides into two distinct parts:

Part 1 – Jesus is Son of God and king of the world.

- Mark announces the coming of Jesus as a new king, who has a new and different commandment: "repent and believe" rather than "obey and achieve." (1:1 – 3:6)
- Jesus' new kingship will produce a new kingdom: a new and different people of God. (3:7 – 6:6)
- Conflict increases between Jesus' kingdom and the rival kingdoms of this world. (6:7 – 8:30)

Part 2 – Jesus the king will suffer and be defeated.

- A surprise turning point: Jesus, the ruling Son of God, will suffer and die. (8:31 – 9:13)
- What it means to live as citizens of a kingdom in conflict. (9:14 – 13:37)
- The suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus: His ultimate triumph over sin and death, and the start of his kingdom. (chapters 14 – 16)

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This two-part structure makes the message of Mark's Gospel clear: Jesus is the rightful king of the world, and he calls us to find life in him by becoming his followers. But his victory comes through defeat: the rightful king will suffer and die, and his followers will experience conflict as well.

The conquering king will win by being conquered. It's a surprising kingdom.

Why study the Gospel of Mark today?

We will encounter 3 major themes throughout Mark's account, all of which directly address issues that are at the heart of modern life:

1. *The Authority of Jesus* – Contemporary American culture is built around the belief that happiness comes from expressing our deepest feelings and staying true to ourselves by throwing off all restraints on self-expression. We treasure choice and detest commands. As Queen Elsa put it in the anthem of our generation *Let It Go*: “No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I'm free!”

Yet we often find that our cherished independent self-sufficiency can isolate us from others, and doesn't lead to the good life we hope it will. From the very beginning of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the Son of God and the universe's king. Jesus does not merely *suggest* or *inform*. He *announces* his kingship and he *calls* people to follow him and find life. Mark's Gospel shows the beauty of rightful authority, and challenges us to think about whom we follow, and why.

2. *The Conflict of Kingdoms* – Mark paints a picture of life as a battle that's raging for your heart and mind, and only one side can win. Jesus is regularly seen provoking and attacking the legitimacy of rival authorities that lead people away from God, earning their hatred in return.

This conflict of kingdoms is still alive and well today. You see it everywhere: the conflict of identity (am I what I experience inside, or am I who God says I am?), individualistic spiritualities (adding some religion to other cherished beliefs), or the increasing tendency in our culture to identify the Gospel with things like hatred and bigotry... the list goes on. Mark will instruct us, and even at times surprise us, as we see who Jesus is in conflict with (and who he's *not* in conflict with) and how he handles that tension.

3. *The Cost of Discipleship* – Jesus alone understood that the conflict of kingdoms would cost him dearly; far more dearly than his followers could imagine. But paying that cost was central to his mission. In the same way, Jesus teaches his followers that the conflict of kingdoms will cost them as well, and that this cost is just as central to their mission as it was to his.

Being a disciple of Jesus is no longer the easy proposition it once was in American culture. The enormous pressure being put on Biblical beliefs today has effectively erased any neutral ground. Those who want to follow Jesus will either compromise by redefining the Bible to fit the culture, or they will stay faithful to Jesus by paying the sometimes-painful costs of swimming against the stream. The conflict is unavoidable.

Jesus said it would be. After all, we follow a king whose destination was not a palace, but a cross. That's where his footprints lead. Will we follow?