

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Mark



60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: Step into the Story

He jumped to his feet and came to Jesus... and followed Jesus along the road.

(Mark 10:50, 52)

Mark may be the shortest of the four New Testament gospels, but it is also by far the most intense. Mark is like the driver of a Formula 1 racing car. He puts his foot to the floor in the very first verse and he doesn't let up the pace until he brings it to its sudden surprise ending. Mark's gospel is a breathless succession of exhilarating highs and lows because that is precisely how it felt to be one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Mark wants us to experience what it was like for Peter and his friends when Jesus called them to leave their old lives behind and step into his story.

Mark wrote his gospel in Greek, the educated language in the first-century Roman Empire. His favourite Greek word is *eutheōs*, which means *immediately, at once or straightaway*.¹ He uses it forty-two times in just sixteen chapters. That is how it felt for Peter and his friends when they came into contact with Jesus, a man of action who burned with an incredible sense of purpose. His call to them was not a question: "*How can I help you?*" It was a command to "*Come and follow me.*" He told them to wave goodbye to their quiet lives so that he could catapult them into a whirlwind adventure with God.

Mark loved this about Jesus. His parents had named him

¹ Sometimes Mark even finds the word *eutheōs* a bit too long. He often abbreviates it to *euthus*.

Marcus, a Latin name made famous by two of Rome's greatest action men. Marcus Tullius Cicero had opposed the rise of Julius Caesar, and Mark Antony had helped Caesar to overcome him. We can tell from the way Mark peppers his gospel with words imported from Latin that he was brought up on Roman history books about such men and on myths about Hercules, Aeneas and Romulus.² Mark therefore writes his gospel at a lightning pace in order to present Jesus to his Roman readers as the ultimate man of action. Jesus is far greater than any Roman action hero and he invites us to play our own part in his great story.

Mark also had a second name. The New Testament calls him *John Mark* because, although his parents courted favour with the Romans, they never forgot that they were first and foremost Jews.³ *John* was Hebrew for *The Lord Has Shown Grace*, and it had been the name of high priests, warriors and generals throughout Israel's history.⁴ Mark's Roman education must therefore have been supplemented with Old Testament hero stories about men such as Gideon, Samson, David and Jonathan. Mark's parents told him about God's promise that he would one day send an even greater hero to save the Jewish nation from its oppressors, making all of these Old Testament action men look like nothing more than warm-up acts for the Messiah. No wonder, therefore, Mark is excited as he writes his gospel. He is the first to chronicle the arrival of this Messiah.

Mark's gospel is technically anonymous. He does not name himself as author or list any of his sources. He is too busy narrating the non-stop action. However, several ancient writers

² None of the other gospel writers use as many imported Latin words as Mark – words such as *spekulatōr* meaning *bodyguard* (6:27), *quadrans* referring to a Roman coin known as a *quarter* (12:42), or *phragelloō*, which describes being flogged using a special Roman whip known as a *flagellum* (15:15).

³ See Acts 12:12, 12:25 and 15:37.

⁴ The Hebrew name *Johanan* became *Iōannēs* in Greek and so it entered the English language as *John*. See 2 Kings 25:23; 1 Chronicles 6:10, 12:4, 12:12 and Nehemiah 8:22–23.

tell us that Mark wrote this gospel as scribe when the disciple Peter spoke his memoirs. Eusebius tells us that

*Peter's hearers... were not satisfied with a single hearing... but with all sorts of entreaties pleaded with Mark whose Gospel we have, seeing that he was Peter's follower, to leave them a written statement of the teaching which had been given them verbally. They did not give up until they had persuaded him, and so they became the cause of the written Gospel which bears the name of Mark.*⁵

The second-century bishop Irenaeus of Lyons confirms this, telling us that “*Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, handed down to us in writing what Peter preached.*”⁶ Mark listened to Peter as he preached the story of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire, then he wrote it down so that we might know how to become part of the story too.

Peter was a man of action whose shoot-first-ask-questions-later attitude kept on getting him into trouble. But his weakness was also his greatest strength. He became the leader of the Early Church because nobody was more willing to step into Jesus' story than he was. While the other disciples were content to watch Jesus walk on water, Peter asked him, “*Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water*” (Matthew 14:28). While the other disciples turned their boat and rowed 100 metres to the shore to have breakfast with the risen Jesus, Peter leapt into the water and swam on ahead of them (John 21:7). Mark's gospel still bears the voice of the rough-and-ready fisherman who first spoke it. Peter could not slow himself down as he preached excitedly about Jesus. Nor could Mark as he preserved Peter's words for the likes of you and me.

Mark 1:1–7:23 is set in Galilee and it recounts the early

⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea wrote this just after 300 AD in his *Church History* (2.15.1).

⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons wrote this in c.180 AD in *Against Heresies* (3.1.1).

days after Peter was invited to play a part in **the Messiah's story**. **Mark 7:24–9:29** is set among the pagans and it chronicles Peter's growing realisation that what is happening in Israel is **the world's story**. **Mark 9:30–10:52** takes place on the road to Jerusalem and charts Peter's growing awareness that it is going to be **a costly story**. **Mark 11–15** records the week leading up to Jesus' death and marvels at the fact that this is such **a surprising story**. **Mark 16** is the grand finale of the gospel, describing Peter's mixture of fear and delight as he finds Jesus' tomb empty and realises that he has been called to continue **an unfinished story**.

So get ready to experience Jesus as Peter knew him. Get ready to experience the emotional rollercoaster ride of following Jesus around with his twelve disciples. Mark describes how Peter felt at every bump along the road because the same call to follow Jesus is ours today. Mark expects God to surprise us and to teach us and to humble us and to transform us, just as he did Peter, while we read the pages of his gospel.

Let's get ready to discover what it was like for Peter and his friends to travel around with Jesus. Let's get ready to hear Jesus still speaking to us today. Let's get ready to step into the story.

Journey's End (1:1–8)

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

(Mark 1:1)

There is no Christmas in Mark's gospel. There is no stable. There are no angel choirs. There are no shepherds or wise men. Mark covers in his first 13 verses what it takes Matthew 76 verses and Luke 182 verses to say. Mark has no time to beat around the bush. He takes us straight to the point where Peter came face to face with the adult Jesus.

There is a reason for this. Matthew wrote for Jewish readers and needed to explain how Jesus fitted into the Jewish story. He begins with historical background because he needs to prove that Jesus is the much-prophesied Jewish Messiah. Similarly Luke wrote for Gentile readers and he needed to explain how a man who was crucified as a criminal could be the Saviour of the world. He locates the life of Jesus in the history of the pagan world. But Mark is different. He isn't writing about the Jewish story or the Gentile story. He is writing about one man's encounter with the story of Jesus and about what made him step into the story.¹ He does not mention the early life of Jesus because Peter was not there. He takes us straight to the moment where their two stories collided.

Jesus does not appear in these opening eight verses. Mark builds anticipation for the moment when he appears in verse 9. In comparison to the other gospel writers, Mark tells us

¹ Mark reminds us in 1:1 that the Gospel isn't primarily our story. It is the story about Jesus the Messiah.

very little about what John the Baptist said. Instead he fills our senses with vivid detail so that we can sense how Peter felt at the beginning of his journey. Eyewitness detail is a major feature of Mark's gospel. Jesus doesn't just go to sleep in a boat; he goes to sleep in a boat *on a cushion* (4:38). Jesus doesn't just make people sit down to eat; he makes them sit down *on the green grass* (6:39). A blind man doesn't just leap up to talk to Jesus; he *throws his cloak aside* in his eagerness to talk to him (10:50). Mark sets the scene with vivid detail in these opening verses. He describes the clothing and the diet of a strange preacher who appeared in the wilderness.² He describes the crowds that gathered to him at the River Jordan. He tells us little about what John actually said.³ What matters more is that we feel we are there at the start of Peter's journey.

Mark invites us to participate in Peter's confusion. He quotes far less from the Old Testament than Matthew does because his Roman readers are largely unfamiliar with the Jewish Scriptures, but he begins his gospel with two Old Testament quotations in order to convey to us just how confused first-century Jews were about what to expect from their Messiah. In verse 2, Mark quotes from Malachi 3:1, where God says "*I will send my messenger before **me** to prepare the way for **me**,*" but note the way Mark changes the words so that it hints at the divinity of the Messiah: "*I will send my messenger before **you** to prepare the way for **you***". In verse 3, he quotes from Isaiah 40:3, which says this messenger will prepare "*a highway for our God,*" but he changes the words again: the messenger will "*make straight paths for **him***". Mark therefore invites us to share in the

² Elijah had made this the traditional dress of a Jewish prophet (2 Kings 1:8; Zechariah 13:4). It linked John's ministry to a prophecy in Malachi 4:5, which described him as "Elijah".

³ Matthew 3:1-12 and Luke 3:1-20 fill out Mark's brief account by recording much more of John the Baptist's teaching, and Luke records John's parentage. Mark tells us nothing more than Peter and the rest of the crowd knew at the time. He wants us to feel as though we are there.

crowd's confusion. How could the Scriptures prophesy that the Messiah would be a man and yet be God?

Mark invites us to participate in Peter's offence. Southerners from Judea looked down on Galilean northerners such as Peter. When he heard that swarms of Judeans had adopted John the Baptist as their own, it did not endear him to the Galilean fisherman.⁴ Worse still was John's message. Non-Jews who wanted to embrace the God of Israel needed to be baptised in water as a confession that they were dirty Gentiles who needed a bath before they could become part of God's holy people. John's message was therefore outrageous. He told the Jews that their ethnicity could never save them; it could only lull them into a dangerous sense of spiritual pride.⁵ They needed to humble themselves by accepting that they were just as spiritually unclean as any pagan. The Greek word for repentance means a change of mind, which is why in verse 4 it is repentance, rather than simply confession of sin, which brings forgiveness. John told them to confess their sins, to repent of their spiritual pride and to prepare their hearts for the arrival of the Messiah by being baptised in the River Jordan. He called them to admit that they were just as sinful as people from any other nation.

Mark invites us to participate in Peter's excitement. He summarises John the Baptist's message in two short verses: The Messiah is so much greater than the Old Testament prophets that John is not even worthy to take off his shoes like a common slave, and the Messiah will fulfil the great promise of the Old Testament by baptising with the Holy Spirit those who follow

⁴ Mark is not claiming in 1:5 that every single individual in Judea came to listen to John the Baptist. This is a Hebrew way of saying that anyone who failed to do so was the exception rather than the norm.

⁵ Matthew 3:7–10 and Luke 3:7–9 state this in more explicit detail. When Paul talks about *making a straight path* in 1 Thessalonians 3:11, he means dealing with every obstacle which might keep him away from Thessalonica. Pride is one of the biggest obstacles that prevent people coming to faith in Jesus.

him.⁶ Whoever this Messiah might be and however offensive his message, Peter could see he was worth giving up everything to follow.

Mark therefore begins his gospel with a vivid description of how it felt to live in Galilee in the weeks leading up to the start of Jesus' public ministry. He ignores the Christmas story because he wants to take us on the same journey of discovery as the crowd. Jesus told Peter to follow him and now Mark tells us to walk with Peter.

But Mark is too excited about the journey to leave us in the dark completely. He is like a TV newsreader who blurts out the final score of the big match, even though he knows his viewers have not yet had a chance to watch the game. He reveals the end of Peter's journey in the very first verse of his gospel. Peter discovered that Jesus is the long-awaited *Christ* or *Messiah*,⁷ and that he is therefore *the Son of God*. Mark uses the Greek word *euangelion* (the word used by Roman emperors when they claimed that their rule was *gospel* or *good news* for the world) in order to tell us that what Peter and his friends discovered was the ultimate Gospel.⁸ Mark cannot resist encouraging us as we set out on the same journey of discovery as Peter by telling us what amazing treasure we will find at journey's end.

Can you sense Mark's excitement as he prepares us for the moment when the Messiah finally walks onto the stage of history? Can you feel the anticipation in these first eight verses as he builds up to the climactic moment in verse 9? Then come alongside Peter and walk with him in the early days. Mark is inviting you to step into the story.

⁶ This was prophesied in Old Testament passages such as Joel 2:28-29, Isaiah 32:15, 44:3, Jeremiah 31:33-34, Ezekiel 36:26-27, 39:29 and Zechariah 12:10-13:1.

⁷ Mark uses the Greek word *Christos*, which translates the Hebrew word *Messiah* and means *Anointed One*.

⁸ Our word *Gospel* comes from an Anglo-Saxon word for *Good News*. Mark uses the Greek word *kêrussō* in verses 4 and 7 to emphasise that John *heralded* a better message than the one proclaimed by Caesar's heralds.

A Single Step (1:9–20)

He saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said.

(Mark 1:16–17)

An ancient Chinese proverb tells us that *“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”*¹ But what the Chinese proverb fails to tell us is that the first step is usually the hardest. That was certainly the case for Peter when Jesus appeared on the beach and shouted to him in his fishing boat that it was time to set out with him on a journey. Peter had plenty of reasons to refuse when Jesus commanded him to *“Come, follow me.”*

Mark goes out of his way to emphasise Peter’s ignorance of Jesus in these verses. Mark wants us to grasp that we already know as much about Jesus as Peter did at the start of his journey. He does not even mention Peter until the moment when Jesus calls him to take a first step of faith in him. Nothing should stop us from taking a similar first step of faith in Jesus too.

In verses 9–11, Mark tells us about the rumours Peter heard from the River Jordan. When Jesus obeyed John’s call to be baptised, something happened that set him apart from the crowds of people who were baptised with him. The divine voice rang out from heaven and proclaimed that the carpenter from Nazareth was in fact God’s own Son.² When the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form and anointed him to begin

¹ Lao-Tzu wrote this in the sixth century BC in chapter 64 of his *Tao Te Ching*.

² Mark’s Roman readers are too unfamiliar with the Old Testament for him to quote its prophecies that the Messiah would come from Nazareth. We are reminded of this in Matthew 2:23 and 4:13–16 instead.

his public ministry, God the Father, Son and Spirit testified together with one clear voice to the Jewish nation that the Messiah had finally come. Peter's first step on the journey with Jesus was difficult, but he was helped by the rumours he heard from the River Jordan. Faith means acting upon what we hear.

Mark's original Roman readers were used to hearing their emperors claim to be sons of the gods. We will discover later, in 15:39, that one of the most natural ways for a Roman to express conversion from paganism to Christianity was to exclaim that "*Surely this man was the Son of God!*" But to the Jewish ear this announcement meant something more. It meant that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. The Lord had promised King David that one of his descendants would be known as "*the son of God*" and would rule on the throne of Israel forever.³ This event struck Peter so profoundly that he quotes these words in 2 Peter 1:16, reminding his readers that "*We did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty.*" Peter took a first step of faith because he believed the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' baptism. So can we.⁴

In verses 12-13, Mark tells us what happened next. No sooner had Jesus been revealed as the Messiah than the Holy Spirit drove him away from the crowds to endure forty days of testing in the desert.⁵ For a Jew like Peter, the words *forty* and *desert* meant only one thing. Jesus had re-enacted the forty years which the Israelites spent in the desert after their exodus

³ 1 Chronicles 17:11-14; Psalm 2:6-8; 89:20-29. God's words also refer back to Isaiah 42:1.

⁴ Peter was not there to hear God's voice at Jesus' baptism (2 Peter 1:17) but, because he believed the word of others, he heard the same voice at Jesus' transfiguration (1:18). Unless we take an initial step of faltering faith based on the testimony of others, we will never experience Jesus powerfully for ourselves.

⁵ The Greek word *ekballō* in 1:12 is the same word that Mark uses throughout his gospel for Jesus *driving out* demons. The Holy Spirit looked like a dove but he was very firm with Jesus. He is firm with us too.

from Egypt but, where they had succumbed to temptation and sinned, he had passed the test with flying colours.⁶ Mark does not give us any detail about how Satan tempted Jesus, because Peter was not there to hear it.⁷ Peter responded to faith in an incomplete story. So must we.

In verses 14–15, Mark tells us that Peter began to understand what it meant for Jesus to be Israel's Messiah. After John was imprisoned for daring to question King Herod's actions, Jesus started preaching all around Galilee that "*The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!*"⁸ Mark uses the Greek word *euangelion*, or *gospel*, in both verses and he uses the word *kērussō*, or *to herald*, in verse 14 because these were the words used by the Roman imperial machine. He tells us that Jesus proclaimed he was a greater King than Caesar's sinful governor Herod, and that he told the Jewish nation it was time for them to step into God's great story. Jesus demonstrated his Kingdom rule as well as preaching it – turning water into wine, healing many people and giving Peter a miraculous catch of fish before he called him to follow him (Luke 5:1–11; John 2:1–12; 4:46–54).⁹ Mark omits this detail in order to take us swiftly to the moment when Jesus commanded Peter to step into his story and when Peter acted *at once* on the evidence he had seen.¹⁰ Immediately he left his fishing nets behind and followed Jesus.

⁶ Jesus was the true Son of God and therefore the true Israel (Exodus 4:22–23; Jeremiah 31:20). Matthew 2:15 quotes from Hosea 11:1 to make this point explicitly.

⁷ *Satan* is the Hebrew word for *Adversary*. The Devil is called this at least 18 times in the Old Testament.

⁸ Jesus proclaimed that he was the promised King of Israel who would demolish anything that dared resist heaven's rule. The Gospel isn't primarily about our need. It's the announcement of Jesus' identity.

⁹ Luke has a different chronology for some of the events in Mark 1. Mark uses the Greek word for *straightaway* 11 times in this chapter to express that all of these events happened on top of one another.

¹⁰ In fact, almost a year passed between Jesus' baptism in 27 AD and his calling Peter to follow him in 28 AD.

When Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon, he exclaimed in triumph that “*That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for all mankind.*” Mark tells us that for Peter it was the same. In verses 16–20, he emphasises that Peter was a nobody. He calls him by his original name Simon, even though John 1:42 tells us that by this time Jesus had already renamed him Peter, which means *Rock*.¹¹ Mark wants us to understand that, at this stage, he was not yet a rock with which Jesus could build. He was more like his namesake Simeon, the son of Jacob who was cursed for his rash enthusiasm. Mark wants us to understand that Peter set out on his journey of faith in Jesus even though he had more questions than he had answers.

Mark wants to prevent us from treating our questions as excuses not to step into Jesus’ story. Peter and his brother Andrew had better reasons to delay making their first step of faith than we have, yet they believed Jesus when he promised them in verse 17 that, if they followed him, he would teach them how to fish for the souls of men and women.¹² They believed that he would turn nobodies like them into great apostles.¹³ You may have more questions than answers at this early stage in Mark’s gospel, but don’t let that stop you from praying and telling Jesus that you want to take a first step of faith into his great story. Your single step will be a giant leap into the adventure of a lifetime.

¹¹ Mark only switches from *Simon* to *Peter* when Jesus names him one of the Twelve in 3:16. The Roman Empire knew him as *Peter* or as the Aramaic equivalent *Cephas* (1 Corinthians 9:5; 15:5; Galatians 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14), so Mark emphasises that he was a very different man at the start of his journey.

¹² Jesus puts the onus for our fruitfulness on himself when he promises literally, “*Come after me and I will turn you into fishers of men.*” A fisherman is simply a pleasure-boater unless he returns with fish. Jesus enabled Peter to see 3,000 people saved as a result of a single sermon on the Day of Pentecost.

¹³ The Greek word Mark uses for Peter’s fishing partners *preparing* their nets in 1:19 is *katartizō*, the same word that Paul uses in Ephesians 4:11–12 to describe apostles *preparing* the Church for works of service.