

The Beginning of the Gospel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 13:1–5, 13; Acts 15:36–39; Mark 1:1–15; Isa. 40:3; Dan. 9:24–27.*

Memory Text: “Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel’ ” (*Mark 1:14, 15, NKJV*).

Who wrote the Gospel of Mark, and why was it written? No Gospel lists the name of the author. The one that comes the closest is John, with reference to the beloved disciple (*see John 21:20, 24*).

However, from early times, each of the canonical Gospels has been associated with either an apostle (Matthew, John) or with a companion of an apostle. For example, the Gospel of Luke is linked with Paul (*see Col. 4:14, 2 Tim. 4:11, Philem. 1:24*). The Gospel of Mark is linked with Peter (*see 1 Pet. 5:13*).

Though the author of Mark never gives his name in the text, early church tradition indicates that the author of the Gospel of Mark was John Mark, a sometime traveling companion of Paul and Barnabas (*Acts 13:2, 5*) and later an associate of Peter (*1 Pet. 5:13*).

The first step this week will be to learn about Mark as reported in Scripture, to see his early failure and eventual recovery. Then the study will turn to the opening section of Mark with a look forward to where the story is headed and a look backward at why a failed and then restored missionary would write such a text.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 6.

The Failed Missionary

Read Acts 12:12. How is Mark introduced in the book of Acts?

It seems probable that John Mark, the most likely author of the Gospel of Mark, was a young man when the events in Acts 12 occurred, probably in the A.D. mid-40's. He is introduced in verse 12 as the son of a woman named Mary. She was evidently a wealthy supporter of the church and held the prayer meeting at her home, made famous in Acts 12. The story of Peter's escape from prison and the subsequent actions and then the death of Herod are replete with striking, even humorous, contrasts between Peter and the king. John Mark does not really play any role in the story, but the introduction of him at this point prepares for his later connection with Barnabas and Saul.

Read Acts 13:1–5, 13. How did John Mark get attached to Saul and Barnabas, and what was the outcome?

Acts 13 describes the first missionary journey of Saul and Barnabas, starting about A.D. 46. John Mark is not mentioned until verse 5, and his role is simply as a helper or servant. No other reference is made to the young man until verse 13, where the brief account notes that he returned to Jerusalem.

No reason is given for this departure, and the absence of any description of his feelings or emotions leaves to the imagination what motivated his withdrawal from the missionary effort, which no doubt was filled with peril and challenges. Ellen G. White indicates that "Mark, overwhelmed with fear and discouragement, wavered for a time in his purpose to give himself wholeheartedly to the Lord's work. Unused to hardships, he was disheartened by the perils and privations of the way."—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 169. In short, things simply got too hard for him, and so he wanted out.

Recall a time when you backed off from something—or even flat out failed at it—in your Christian walk. What did you learn from the experience?

A Second Chance

Read Acts 15:36–39. Why did Paul reject John Mark, and why did Barnabas give him a second chance?

The reason for Paul's rejection of the young man is given in Acts 15:38. Mark had withdrawn from them and had not continued in the work of ministry. Paul's attitude is understandable, if blunt. Missionary life, particularly in the ancient world, was rough and demanding (*compare with 2 Cor. 11:23–28*). Paul depended on his fellow missionaries to help carry the burden of such challenging work and conditions. In his perspective, one who deserted so quickly did not deserve a place in a missionary team fighting hand to hand against evil forces.

Barnabas disagreed. He saw potential in Mark and did not want to leave the young man behind. Such a deep dispute arose between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark that they parted ways. Paul chose Silas to go with him, and Barnabas took Mark.

Acts does not explain why Barnabas chose to take Mark with him. In fact, this passage is the last place that the two men appear in Acts. But interestingly, it is not the last place Mark is mentioned in the New Testament.

Read Colossians 4:10, 2 Timothy 4:11, Philemon 24, and 1 Peter 5:13. What details about Mark's recovery do these verses suggest?

An amazing transformation seems to have occurred in Mark. In these passages, Paul indicates the value of Mark to him and to ministry. Paul counts him as one of his fellow workers and wants Timothy to bring Mark with him. The book of 1 Peter indicates that Peter as well had a close relationship with Mark. These books by Paul and Peter were written likely in the early A.D. 60s, some 15–20 years after the experience in Acts 15. Mark clearly recovered from his failure, almost certainly through the trust that his cousin, Barnabas, placed in him.

Consider a time when you or a friend failed and were given a second chance. How did that experience change you and those who helped you? How did it modify your ministry to others?

The Messenger

Read Mark 1:1–8. Who are the characters in these verses, and what do they say and do?

These verses have three main characters: Jesus Christ, referred to in Mark 1:1; God the Father, implied in the words of Mark 1:2; and John the Baptist, the messenger and preacher who is the main subject of the last section of this passage.

Mark 1:2, 3 contains a quotation from the Old Testament that Mark presents to describe what will happen in the story. What Mark quotes is a blending of phrases from three passages: Exodus 23:20, Isaiah 40:3, and Malachi 3:1.

Read Exodus 23:20, Isaiah 40:3, and Malachi 3:1. What do these three passages have in common?

Exodus 23:20 refers to an angel that God will send before Israel to bring them to Canaan. Isaiah 40:3 speaks of God appearing in the wilderness with a highway prepared before Him. Malachi 3:1 speaks of a messenger going before the Lord to prepare His way. All three of these passages speak of a journey.

The text in Isaiah has many ties with the ministry of John the Baptist and also focuses on the *Way of the Lord*. In the Gospel of Mark, the Lord Jesus is on a journey. The fast-moving narrative enhances the sense of this journey, a journey that will lead to the cross and to His sacrificial death for us.

But much must happen before He reaches the cross. The journey is just beginning, and Mark will tell us all about it.

In keeping with the quotation from the Old Testament in Mark 1:2, 3, John the Baptist calls for repentance, a turning away from sin, and a turning back to God (*Mark 1:4*). Clothed like the ancient prophet Elijah (*compare with 2 Kings 1:8*), he speaks in Mark 1:7, 8 about the One coming after him who is mightier than he. His statement that he is not worthy to loosen a strap of the Coming One's sandals shows the exalted view he has of Jesus.

Jesus' Baptism

Read Mark 1:9–13. Who is present at the baptism of Jesus, and what happens?

John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River. As Jesus comes up out of the water, He sees the heavens being torn open and the Holy Spirit descending on Him like a dove. He hears the voice of God from heaven, “ ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’ ” (*Mark 1:11, ESV*).

These events point to the importance of Jesus' baptism. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are present, together affirming the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The importance of this event will find its echo at the scene of the cross in Mark 15. Many of the same elements of the story will recur in that scene.

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. The word “drove” is from the Greek word *ekballō*, the common word used in the Gospel of Mark for driving out demons. The Spirit's presence here illustrates the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life. The Lord is already starting the journey of His ministry, and He immediately confronts Satan. The sense of the struggle in the scene is displayed by the reference to 40 days of temptation, the presence of wild animals, and the angels ministering to Jesus.

An unusual characteristic of the opening scene of the Gospel of Mark is that Jesus is presented as a character with both divinity and humanity. On the side of divinity: He is the Christ, the Messiah (*Mark 1:1*), the Lord announced by a messenger (*Mark 1:2, 3*), mightier than John (*Mark 1:7*), the beloved Son on whom the Spirit descends (*Mark 1:10, 11*). But on the side of humanity, we see the following: He is baptized by John (not the other way around, *Mark 1:9*), He is driven by the Spirit (*Mark 1:12*), tempted by Satan (*Mark 1:13*), with wild animals (*Mark 1:13*), and ministered to by angels (*Mark 1:13*).

Why these contrasts? This points to the amazing reality of Christ, our Lord and Savior, our God, and yet also a human being, our brother and our example. How do we fully wrap our minds around this idea? We can't. But we accept it on faith and marvel at what this truth reveals to us about God's love for humanity.

What does it tell us about the amazing love of God that, though Jesus was God, He would take upon Himself our humanity in order to save us?

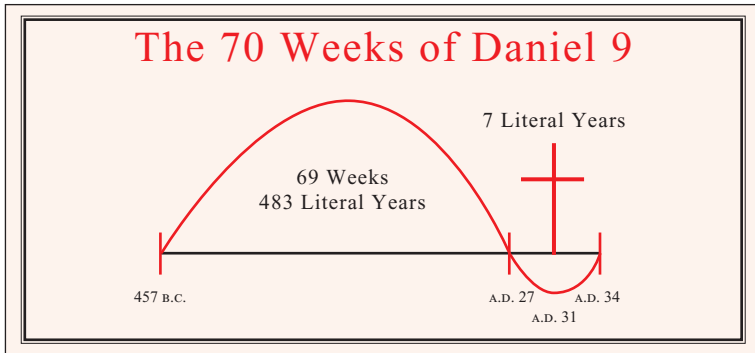
The Gospel According to Jesus

Read Mark 1:14, 15. What are the three parts of the gospel message that Jesus proclaimed?

Mark summarizes here the simple and direct message of Jesus. Its three parts are illustrated in the following table:

Category	Content
Time Prophecy	The time is fulfilled.
Covenant Promise	The kingdom of God is near.
Call to Discipleship	Repent and believe the gospel.

The time prophecy to which Jesus refers is the 70-week prophecy of Daniel 9:24–27. This prophecy finds fulfillment in the baptism of Jesus, where He is anointed with the Holy Spirit and begins His ministry (*Acts 10:38*). The amazing 70-week prophecy is illustrated in the following chart:



In this prophecy, one day stands for one year (*Num. 14:34, Ezek. 4:6*). The prophecy began in 457 B.C. with the decree issued by Artaxerxes, king of Persia, completing the work of restoring Jerusalem (*see Ezra 7*).

Sixty-nine prophetic weeks would extend to A.D. 27, the time when Jesus was baptized and anointed with the Holy Spirit at the commencement of His ministry.

His crucifixion would take place three and a half years later.

Finally, the completion of the seventieth week would occur in A.D. 34 when Stephen was stoned and the gospel message started going to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews.

When was the last time you studied the 70-week prophecy? How can knowing this prophecy help increase your faith not only in Jesus but in the trustworthiness of the prophetic Word?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Voice in the Wilderness,” pp. 97–108, in *The Desire of Ages*; and “Heralds of the Gospel,” pp. 166–176, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

How fascinating that Revelation 14:6, 7, the first angel’s message, parallels the gospel message of Jesus in Mark 1:15.

The first angel brings the everlasting gospel to the world in the last days in preparation for the Second Coming. Just like the message of Jesus, the angel’s end-time gospel has the same three elements as illustrated in the table below:

Mark 1	Category	Revelation 14
Time Fulfilled (<i>Daniel 9</i>)	Time Prophecy	Judgment Hour (<i>Daniel 7, 8</i>)
Kingdom Near	Covenant Promise	Everlasting Gospel
Repent, Believe	Call to Discipleship	Fear, Glorify, Worship God

The first angel’s message announces the beginning of the pre-Advent judgment, which began in 1844 and was predicted in the 2,300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14. The judgment brings the kingdom of God to His persecuted people (*Dan. 7:22*). The first angel’s call to fear, glorify, and worship God is the call to discipleship, issued to the world in the last days as the beast powers of Revelation 13 present a false god to fear, glorify, and worship.

Just as Jesus’ message in Mark 1 is intimately tied to the prophecies of Daniel at the beginning of the gospel proclamation, so the first angel’s message is as well tied to Daniel at the close of earth’s history.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Compare and contrast John the Baptist and Jesus in Mark 1:1–13. What special lessons do you learn from the way they are presented?
- ❷ Consider the meaning of baptism. Read Romans 6:1–4 and John 3:1–8, and compare them with the baptism of Jesus in Mark 1:9–13. What parallels and contrasts do you see? How does this help you understand more clearly the meaning of baptism?
- ❸ Compare and contrast the gospel according to Jesus in Mark 1:14, 15 and the first angel’s message in Revelation 14:6, 7. How does understanding these messages help you see better your mission for today?

Bewildered Shaman, Part 1

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Father was the most prominent person in his small town in Nepal. Everyone sought his help. Townspeople believed that his animal sacrifices could cure any disease. Father came from a long line of shamans, and he became the shaman after the death of his father, who also was a shaman.

Father believed that his rituals wielded great power in the spirit world, so he was puzzled when he couldn't help the person whom he loved most—his wife. He couldn't cure her or even diagnose her illness. He sacrificed a chicken, but her pain remained. He gave money to another shaman, but she lost weight. He took her to a physician, but she grew weaker.

Father's bewilderment grew when his adult daughter, Divya, returned home to help her mother. He came home one day and couldn't find Mother or Divya. Searching the house, he finally found them in an upstairs room, kneeling on the floor and talking to someone he couldn't see.

Father was astonished. He suspected something was terribly wrong. But he quietly slipped out of the room so as to not disturb them. He wondered whether his daughter had secretly become a shaman like him.

When he saw Divya later, he asked what she and Mother had been doing.

"We were praying to my God to heal Mother," Divya said.

"Which God?" Father asked. He worshiped many gods.

"To my God, Jesus," she said. "I have left our family religion. I have found a new God in Jesus." She explained that her God created the heavens and the earth. "If I pray, He will hear and heal Mother," she said.

Father didn't believe it. He didn't see how this God could be any more powerful than any of the family gods.

When Divya needed to return to her home in another town, she asked to take Mother with her. "She is sick, and you don't have time to take care of her because you are working," she said. "I'll take her with me."

Father, who worked both as a shaman and a construction worker, agreed. He was unable to help Mother, and he doubted that she would last long.

"She is your mother," he said. "If she dies, let me know."

Six months passed before Father saw Mother again. He traveled to Divya's house and was surprised to find Mother healthy. He was full of questions.

"Why is Mother well?" he asked. "What medicine did you give her?"

Divya replied that she had only prayed to God. "God heard my request," she said. "Now Mother is well and happy and goes to church with me."

Father didn't believe it. He laughed. He had never heard of such a God who healed without an animal sacrifice or another ritual.

This mission story illustrates Mission Objective No. 2 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's "I Will Go" strategic plan, "To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach . . . among unreached and under-reached people groups." For more information, go to the website: IWILLGo2020.org.