

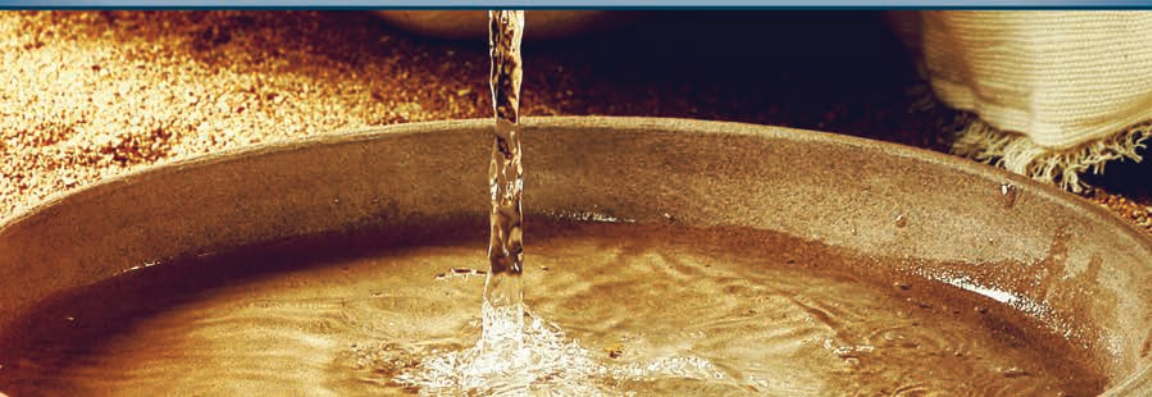


CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

SWINDOLL'S
LIVING
INSIGHTS

NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

MARK



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*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 2

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

For more than sixty years I have loved the Bible. It was that love for the Scriptures, mixed with a clear call into the gospel ministry during my tour of duty in the Marine Corps, that resulted in my going to Dallas Theological Seminary to prepare for a lifetime of ministry. During those four great years I had the privilege of studying under outstanding men of God, who also loved God's Word. They not only held the inerrant Word of God in high esteem, they taught it carefully, preached it passionately, and modeled it consistently. A week never passes without my giving thanks to God for the grand heritage that has been mine to claim! I am forever indebted to those fine theologians and mentors, who cultivated in me a strong commitment to the understanding, exposition, and application of God's truth.

For more than fifty years I have been engaged in doing just that—*and how I love it!* I confess without hesitation that I am addicted to the examination and the proclamation of the Scriptures. Because of this, books have played a major role in my life for as long as I have been in ministry—especially those volumes that explain the truths and enhance my understanding of what God has written. Through these many years I have collected a large personal library, which has proven invaluable as I have sought to remain a faithful student of the Bible. To the end of my days, my major goal in life is to communicate the Word with accuracy, insight, clarity, and practicality. Without informative and reliable books to turn to, I would have “run dry” decades ago.

Among my favorite and most well-worn volumes are those that have enabled me to get a better grasp of the biblical text. Like most expositors, I am forever searching for literary tools that I can use to hone my gifts and sharpen my skills. For me, that means finding resources that make the complicated simple and easy to understand, that offer insightful comments and word pictures that enable me to see the relevance of sacred truth in light of my twenty-first-century world, and that drive those truths home to my heart in ways I do not easily forget. When I come across such books, they wind up in my hands as I devour them and then place them in my library for further reference . . . and, believe me, I often return to them. What a relief it is to have these resources to turn to when I lack fresh insight, or when I need just the right story or illustration, or when I get stuck in the tangled text and cannot find my way out. For the serious expositor, a library is essential. As a mentor of mine once said, “Where else can you have ten thousand professors at your fingertips?”

In recent years I have discovered there are not nearly enough resources like those I just described. It was such a discovery that prompted me to consider

becoming a part of the answer instead of lamenting the problem. But the solution would result in a huge undertaking. A writing project that covers all of the books and letters of the New Testament seemed overwhelming and intimidating. A rush of relief came when I realized that during the past fifty-plus years I've taught and preached through most of the New Testament. In my files were folders filled with notes from those messages that were just lying there, waiting to be brought out of hiding, given a fresh and relevant touch in light of today's needs, and applied to fit into the lives of men and women who long for a fresh word from the Lord. *That did it!* I began to work on plans to turn all of those notes into this commentary on the New Testament.

I must express my gratitude to both Mark Gaither and Mike Svelgel for their tireless and devoted efforts, serving as my hands-on, day-to-day editors. They have done superb work as we have walked our way through the verses and chapters of all twenty-seven New Testament books. It has been a pleasure to see how they have taken my original material and helped me shape it into a style that remains true to the text of the Scriptures, at the same time interestingly and creatively developed, and all the while allowing my voice to come through in a natural and easy-to-read manner.

I need to add sincere words of appreciation to the congregations I have served in various parts of these United States for more than five decades. It has been my good fortune to be the recipient of their love, support, encouragement, patience, and frequent words of affirmation as I have fulfilled my calling to stand and deliver God's message year after year. The sheep from all those flocks have endeared themselves to this shepherd in more ways than I can put into words . . . and none more than those I currently serve with delight at Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas.

Finally, I must thank my wife, Cynthia, for her understanding of my addiction to studying, to preaching, and to writing. Never has she discouraged me from staying at it. Never has she failed to urge me in the pursuit of doing my very best. On the contrary, her affectionate support personally, and her own commitment to excellence in leading Insight for Living for more than three and a half decades, have combined to keep me faithful to my calling "in season and out of season." Without her devotion to me and apart from our mutual partnership throughout our lifetime of ministry together, Swindoll's Living Insights would never have been undertaken.

I am grateful that it has now found its way into your hands and, ultimately, onto the shelves of your library. My continued hope and prayer is that you will find these volumes helpful in your own study and personal application of the Bible. May they help you come to realize, as I have over these many years, that God's Word is as timeless as it is true.

The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever. (Isa. 40:8, NASB)

Chuck Swindoll
Frisco, Texas

THE STRONG'S NUMBERING SYSTEM

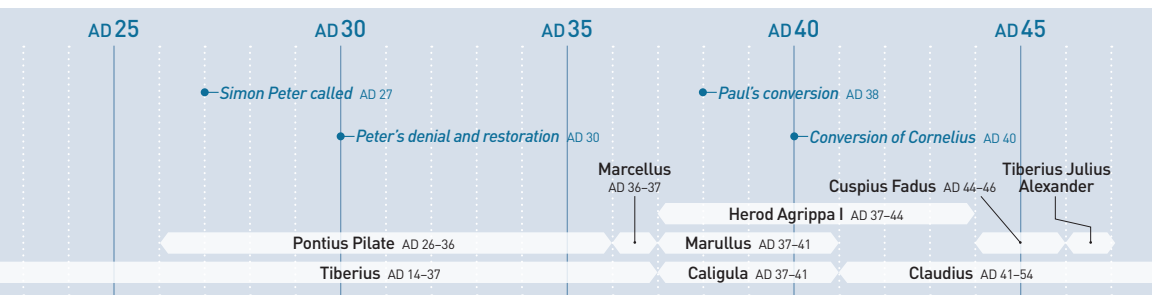
Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary uses the Strong's word-study numbering system to give both newer and more advanced Bible students alike quicker, more convenient access to helpful original-language tools (e.g., concordances, lexicons, and theological dictionaries). The Strong's numbering system, made popular by the *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, is used with the majority of biblical Greek and Hebrew reference works. Those who are unfamiliar with the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek alphabets can quickly find information on a given word by looking up the appropriate index number. Advanced students will find the system helpful because it allows them to quickly find the lexical form of obscure conjugations and inflections.

When a Greek word is mentioned in the text, the Strong's number is included in square brackets after the Greek word. So in the example of the Greek word *agapē* [26], "love," the number is used with Greek tools keyed to the Strong's system.

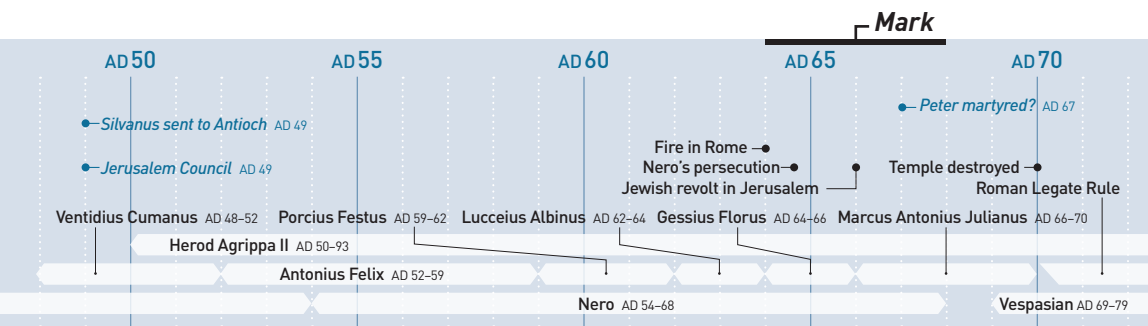
On occasion, a Hebrew word is mentioned in the text. The Strong's Hebrew numbers are completely separate from the Greek numbers, so Hebrew numbers are prefixed with a letter "H." So, for example, the Hebrew word *kapporet* [H3727], "mercy seat," comes from *kopher* [H3722], "to ransom," "to secure favor through a gift."

INSIGHTS ON MARK

Ministry that costs nothing accomplishes nothing. Consequently, faithful discipleship, even in times of hardship, is the theme that dominates Mark's Gospel and may have been the reason he felt compelled to write.



Map of Jesus' Life and Ministry. Mark tells the story of Jesus' life by tracing his journey geographically: After his baptism in the Jordan River (1:1-15), Jesus teaches and heals in Galilee (1:16-9:50), and then he journeys down to Judea for more teaching and healing, concluding in his death and resurrection (10:1-16:8).



MARK

INTRODUCTION

John Mark was not the kind of man you would expect to record the first account of Jesus’ life. Unlike the studious Matthew, the scholarly Luke, the contemplative John, or countless other worthy followers of Christ, Mark had distinguished himself early on as an immature young man . . . impetuous, unreliable, and faltering in his commitment to the gospel. In other words, he was a lot like us.

In the early days of the church, he probably lived in Jerusalem with his mother, Mary, in whose house the first believers met for worship and prayer (Acts 12:12). During this time, he came to know the original apostles, including Simon Peter, as well as several key members of the fledgling band of followers. Then, around AD 46, he was given an opportunity to take a more active role in the church that had grown up there in Jerusalem over the past decade. Mark’s cousin Barnabas (Col. 4:10) and an up-and-coming teacher named Paul brought famine relief money to Jerusalem from the church in Antioch. For the past several years, the two men had been leading a flourishing Gentile congregation in Syria, and they invited young Mark to join their ministry (Acts 12:25). The epicenter of Christianity was moving from Jerusalem to Antioch, and as Providence would have it, Mark moved with it.

After a few years of service with Barnabas and Paul, Mark was invited to become a “helper” on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:5). He undoubtedly enjoyed the excitement and probably embraced this new adventure with youthful enthusiasm. Not far into the expedition, however, he abandoned the mission and returned home (Acts 13:13). The New Testament says nothing about his reasons, but we may surmise that the difficulties of ministry and travel proved too demanding for Mark. Paul and Barnabas pressed on without him and

THE GOSPEL OF MARK AT A GLANCE

SECTION	DISCIPLES CALLED	DISCIPLES CULLED
PASSAGE	1:1–3:35	4:1–8:38
THEMES	<p>The call to follow Jesus</p> <p>Jesus' ministry begins</p>	<p>Jesus, the emissary of peace</p> <p>Repent and be ready for the kingdom!</p>
KEY TERMS	<p>Follow</p> <p>Forgiveness</p> <p>Arise</p> <p>Immediately</p> <p>Preach</p>	<p>Hear</p> <p>Disciple</p> <p>Parable</p> <p>Encourage</p> <p>Understand</p>

DISCIPLES CULTIVATED	DISCIPLES CHALLENGED
9:1–13:37	14:1–16:20
<p>Jesus pours wisdom into His disciples</p> <p>Jesus prepares His disciples for ministry</p>	<p>The victory of the kingdom of God over Satan</p> <p>Challenges of discipleship</p>
<p>Kingdom Gospel Amazed Season Fear</p>	<p>Surrender Flee Messiah</p>

completed their objectives, overcoming incredible hardship and enduring intense persecution along the way. Mark may have been one of several helpers—the New Testament strongly suggests that Titus had been Paul’s right-hand man from the very beginning—but he is the only one noted for forsaking his responsibilities during the missionary journey. While the rest of the team pressed on, accepting the difficulties of pioneer missionary work, it seems Mark sought relief in the safety and comforts of home.

After a year or more had passed, the leaders in Antioch made plans to launch a second missionary journey. Barnabas suggested they include John Mark on the team, but Paul would hear nothing of it (Acts 15:37-38). Barnabas, ever the champion of second chances, refused to give up hope that Mark could become a trustworthy, dependable minister of the gospel. Paul—mission-focused and disciplined to the core—couldn’t bring himself to recruit a proven deserter, especially when their purpose was to strengthen and encourage Christians living under persecution. When the two couldn’t come to terms, Paul chose Silas as a partner and headed off in one direction; Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus (Acts 15:39-40).

In retrospect, it seems both men were right. Paul’s mission was so critical that the team couldn’t afford a weak link. Barnabas recognized, however, that some disciples need seasoning, which requires time, experience, the grace of forgiveness, and personal investment.

Years later, the church would reap the benefits of Barnabas’s personal investment as Mark served Paul during his first imprisonment in Rome (Col. 4:10) and labored with Timothy in Asia Minor. Several church historians record Mark’s service to Peter as an interpreter and personal assistant for many years (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 1:172-173; cf. 1 Pet. 5:13). Then, near the end of Paul’s life, as the apostle languished in prison awaiting execution, he instructed Timothy, “Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service” (2 Tim. 4:11).

We don’t know specifically what happened after Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus that turned the wavering young disciple into a sturdy pillar of the Christian movement, but two things are clear. First, the personal investment of Barnabas proved crucial. Second, Mark eventually understood that followers of Christ must be servants and that discipleship requires sacrifice. Ministry that costs nothing accomplishes nothing. Consequently, faithful discipleship, even in times of hardship, is

the theme that dominates Mark's Gospel and may have been the reason he felt compelled to write.

DISCIPLES UNDER DURESS

While the Holy Spirit prompted Mark to write this Gospel account, several clues within the text and from history suggest that additional influences motivated him and gave his writing focus. The writings of early Christian leaders indicate that Mark wrote while in Rome around the time of Simon Peter's death.¹ Internal evidence supports their testimony; many scholars note Mark's frequent use of "Latinisms" and Latin loan words (e.g., the use of "legion" in 5:9, 15).² Moreover, he explained Jewish customs (e.g., 7:2-4; 12:18; 14:12; 15:42) and translated Aramaic terms and names (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 10:46; 14:36; 15:22, 34), suggesting a western audience largely unfamiliar with eastern culture and the setting of Judea. Most importantly, however, Mark gave special attention—more than the other Gospels—to the issues of persecution, the cost of discipleship, and the possibility of martyrdom (e.g., 8:34-38; 10:28-30; 13:9-13). Taken together, the evidence strongly suggests that Mark wrote this chronicle of Jesus' ministry to encourage and challenge believers during the persecution of Nero (AD 64–68), which claimed the lives of innumerable Christians, including Paul and Simon Peter.

The persecution began shortly after a massive fire consumed large portions of Rome, leaving many homeless and potentially destitute. By then, Emperor Nero's eccentricities had grown more extreme, making him unpopular. Rumors began to circulate that he had arranged the fire himself in order to rebuild the affected sections of Rome to his own liking. According to the historian Tacitus,

All human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. . . . Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses,

or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.³

According to church tradition, Simon Peter was martyred in the early days of this persecution. As these horrors began to decimate the church in Rome—and by extension, the church worldwide—Mark undoubtedly felt compelled to encourage believers to remain faithful in their commitment to Christ and to follow His example to the end.

Because Mark wrote with such a specific purpose in mind, his chronicle of Jesus' earthly life doesn't follow some of the normal conventions of a biography—at least not by modern standards. Mark didn't feel compelled to follow a strictly chronological outline, choosing instead to group episodes by theme or topic. Eusebius, writing in the third century, quotes an early second-century church father, Papias, to explain Mark's literary approach:

This also the presbyter [probably referring to the apostle John] said: Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.⁴

The result of Mark's writing is not a biography that records the precise order of events, but an account of Jesus' cultivation of followers in which episodes are arranged to communicate a specific message. The subject of this Gospel is unquestionably Jesus; only two stories feature someone other than the Savior, and those highlight the dedication and faithfulness of John the Baptizer (1:1-8; 6:14-29). But while the subject is Jesus, the point is unquestionably discipleship—its demands, its cost, its impact, and its rewards. While Jesus is central to the story, Mark continually focuses on the disciples, who struggle with a variety of challenges, including selfishness, pettiness, shortsightedness, indecision, fear, and faithlessness. Of course, by the time of his writing, the church had come to know these men as heroes of the gospel—most notably Simon Peter, who may have been martyred shortly before Mark

completed his work. Consequently, the story of how Jesus—our ultimate example of sacrifice and service—called and prepared His followers to carry on His mission would have been critical to the morale and faithfulness of persecuted believers.

A GOSPEL FOR TODAY

The style of Mark's writing is not unlike an adventure movie: fast-paced and action-packed. The Gospel of Mark makes for stirring drama—compelling, inspirational, challenging, and sobering—just what believers facing imminent danger would need to help them steel their resolve. While the other Gospel accounts often *explain* the themes and subtext of Jesus' story, Mark tells a vivid story that *shows* us what's important. As one writer stated, "Mark writes with a paintbrush . . . Mark has much more *implicit* major themes, requiring readers to enter into the drama of the Gospel in order to understand its meaning."⁵ In the first century, when most Christians were not literate and copies of sacred writings were scarce, believers gathered to hear the reading of Scripture. Mark took full advantage of this and, undoubtedly having seen his fair share of Roman theater drama, brought the very best elements of storytelling to bear on this remarkable piece of literature.

While Mark wrote to a persecuted first-century audience, the Holy Spirit prepared this message for the ages. Throughout the two millennia since Mark's writing, each generation has faced a wide range of challenges to faithful discipleship, and the Gospel of Mark has fulfilled its purpose. Our circumstances and challenges are different today, but this inspired literature is just as much ours. In fact, Mark's style and presentation of Jesus' story is now timelier than ever. The Gospel of Mark conveys its message in a way that our fast-paced, pragmatic generation can appreciate. It is a relatively brief, bottom-line, executive summary of Jesus' life, mission, and ministry depicted in the narrative style today's reader enjoys most. If you enjoy a dynamic page-turner, you'll love Mark's account of the Lord's time on earth. He moves the reader from one action scene to another to show the Savior on the move.

As I stated earlier, Jesus is the central figure of this narrative—it is Jesus who brings the kingdom and redeems humanity from the evil dominion that has asserted itself in the world since Adam and Eve's first sin. God Almighty became the incarnate "God with us" (Matt. 1:23; cf. Isa. 7:14) in the person of Jesus in order to destroy evil, forgive sins, defeat Satan, and reclaim His creation. But Jesus involved His

disciples in this endeavor, and Mark especially intended the followers of Jesus to see themselves in his Gospel account. From beginning to end, we will see the Master preparing His disciples and then propelling them forward to encounter challenges they felt ill-prepared to meet.

While the disciples rarely understood what was happening and often lacked confidence in their decisions, they began to realize that following Jesus requires neither great intelligence nor heroic bravery—merely a willingness to do as the Son of God commands. They learned that being a disciple is primarily a matter of faithful obedience.

DISCIPLES CALLED (MARK 1:1–3:35)

Jesus' earthly ministry—and Mark's Gospel—begins with the long-awaited Messiah's individual baptism in the Jordan (1:9-11) and personal testing and temptation (1:12-13). However, though this commissioning and launch into public ministry was a very personal, individual affair, Jesus never intended to redeem the world from the dominion of Satan all by Himself. Because He is God—all powerful, all knowing, all sufficient—He *could* accomplish this miraculous feat on His own. But He chose not to. For reasons known only among the three persons of the Trinity, God's plan to save humanity and to transform the world involves people. He seeks and invites disciples. He calls ordinary men and women, like you and me, to become students of His person and His work and then, through a lifelong process of internal renovation, to become responsible agents of His redemptive plan.

For this plan to work, however, God's people must be completely dedicated to His cause. A mission this critical requires people ready to offer their complete, undivided devotion without condition, reservation, or hesitation. In the process of discipleship, we become like servants of a great master who teaches and employs us. Most people, however, are ill-prepared to go “all-in” right away. Of course, the Lord knows this. So, in the beginning, He merely issues a call to follow. The disciple's only responsibility is to heed this call. When we say, “Yes, Lord, here am I,” God will take the lead.

Discipleship can be stretching. As Jesus took the lead in revealing the kingdom of God—both its message and its power—His disciples undoubtedly found themselves in uncomfortable situations. Their Master took stances that were not always popular. A survey of this section finds Jesus and His followers accused of excessive fraternizing with sinners (2:15-17) and violating rules about the Sabbath (2:23-28). There is even a question about whether Jesus was a messenger of Satan (3:20-30)! The disciples would learn to commit to their Master in spite of such adversity, and they would learn the true teaching of

KEY TERMS IN MARK 1:1–3:35

***akoloutheō* (ἀκολουθέω) [190]** “to come after,” “to follow,” “to accompany”

Literally, this verb means “to go the same way”; the metaphorical extension of this idea connotes imitating the thoughts, beliefs, actions, or lifestyle of another. Similarly, we might say of a boy adopting his father’s occupation, “He’s following in the footsteps of his father.” The Old Testament doesn’t make use of a similar Hebrew term for following after God, but the New Testament favors this term, perhaps because of the accessibility of the human example of Christ and His earthly relationship to his disciples.

***aphesis* (ἄφεσις) [859]** “release,” “cancellation,” “pardon,” “forgiveness”

In the New Testament, this noun nearly always refers to God’s forgiveness of human sins. It carries the idea of releasing something or canceling some obligation. In the case of sin, God takes away the penalty for sin. In Mark, this theme is introduced in 1:4 in the ministry of Jesus’ forerunner, John the Baptizer.

***egeirō* (ἐγείρω) [1453]** “to arise,” “to awaken,” “to get up”

This verb depicts lifting or moving upward. Throughout the book of Mark, it has two primary uses. In 1:1–5:43, the primary meaning is simply to “get up.” Jesus helps people rise from the ground to stand after healing or commands them to arise after being restored to complete health. In 6:1–16:8, the majority of uses are metaphorical, referring to resurrection or revival.

***euthys* (εὐθύς) [2117]** “straight,” “immediately,” “proper”

This Greek word is important in the context of a narrative, yet each of the Gospel writers uses the term differently. Mark uses this adverb with the conjunction *kai* (“and” [2532]) to string events together, but without implying that the episodes are necessarily chronological. He uses this adverb in the same way a lecturer lists bullet points to build a case. One might paraphrase Mark’s use of *kai euthys* as “And then there was the time . . .”

***kēryssō* (κηρύσσω) [2784]** “to preach,” “to proclaim,” “to be a herald”

This word generally describes official, public proclamations such as those enjoining royal decrees, public festivals and fasts, or military actions. Such uses appear in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament; e.g., Exod. 32:5; 36:6; 2 Chr. 20:3), along with less frequent uses for proclamations of judgment (e.g., Jon. 3:2) and for the

call of Lady Wisdom (Prov. 1:21; 8:1; 9:3). Thus, in the New Testament, we often read of commissioned messengers proclaiming the good news of the Messiah's kingdom. But we also read, especially in Mark, of "proclaiming" that is not strictly attached to official channels. Rather, it is driven by "the inner power and the necessity of proclamation": "Even before the disciples have been commissioned, those who have been healed proclaim, despite being expressly forbidden to do so. . . . (Mark 1:45. . .). Their encounter with Jesus, their experience of the mercy of God, their own recognition of the dawn of the new age in this Jesus (7:37 echoes Isa. 35:5) are enough to compel them to tell others."¹

the kingdom of God. This would prepare them for steadfast ministry at His side when the going really got rough.

This initial period in Jesus' ministry led up to His selection of twelve of His disciples to be the apostles (3:14-19)—those He would send out with the power and message of the kingdom.

Are You Ready for Some Good News?

MARK 1:1-13

NASB

¹The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER
³AHEAD OF YOU,

WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY;

³ THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE
WILDERNESS,

'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE
LORD,

MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'"

⁴John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness ³preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the

NLT

¹This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.* It began ²just as the prophet Isaiah had written:

"Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, and he will prepare your way.*

³ He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,

'Prepare the way for the LORD's coming!

Clear the road for him!'"*

⁴This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. ⁵All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to

people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. ⁶John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and ^ahis diet was locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he was ^apreaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. ⁸I baptized you ^awith water; but He will baptize you ^awith the Holy Spirit."

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens ^aopening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; ¹¹and a voice came out of the heavens: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."

¹²Immediately the Spirit impelled Him *to go* out into the wilderness. ¹³And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.

1:2 ^aLit *before your face* 1:4 ^aOr *proclaiming*

1:6 ^aLit *he was eating* 1:7 ^aOr *proclaiming*

1:8 ^aThe Gr here can be translated *in, with or by*

1:10 ^aOr *being parted*

see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁶His clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷John announced: "Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals. ⁸I baptize you with* water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!"

⁹One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. ¹⁰As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him* like a dove. ¹¹And a voice from heaven said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy."

¹²The Spirit then compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness, ¹³where he was tempted by Satan for forty days. He was out among the wild animals, and angels took care of him.

1:1 Some manuscripts do not include *the Son of God*. 1:2 Mal 3:1. 1:3 Isa 40:3 (Greek version). 1:8 Or *in*; also in 1:8b. 1:10 Or *toward him, or into him*.

"Always grab the reader by the throat in the first paragraph, sink your thumbs into his windpipe in the second, and hold him against the wall until the tagline."² That's the advice of Paul O'Neil, an author, playwright, and television producer whose career began in the 1950s. More than sixty years later, his advice is timelier than ever. Today's readers gain much of their information from two- to three-minute television sound bites and three-hundred-word Internet articles. Writers today must understand that reality or risk losing their audience before the tagline.

John Mark, writing two thousand years ago, understood the importance of grabbing the reader by the throat. While we today struggle with a million tiny diversions, the Christians in Rome were driven to

distraction by a single ominous prospect: the very real potential of a grisly, agonizing death by torture. Roman officials were rounding up believers by the hundreds and forcing upon them the choice of profaning Christ or suffering torture.

Writing about a later persecution under Emperor Trajan around AD 100, a Roman governor named Pliny the Younger described how he conducted these tribunals:

The method I have observed towards those who have been brought before me as Christians is this: I asked them whether they were Christians; if they admitted it, I repeated the question twice, and threatened them with punishment; if they persisted, I ordered them to be at once punished: for I was persuaded, whatever the nature of their opinions might be, a contumacious and inflexible obstinacy certainly deserved correction. . . . [Some of the accused] repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered religious rites with wine and incense before your statue (which for that purpose I had ordered to be brought, together with those of the gods), and even reviled the name of Christ.³

John Mark understood the urgency of his narrative, so he wasted no time getting his readers into the story of Jesus and His disciples, using just a handful of words (twelve in our translation) to set the stage. Compare that to Matthew's Gospel, which begins with a genealogy containing no fewer than forty-seven names (many of them unpronounceable). Luke's account opens with an almost eighty-word sentence in the NASB translation before the action begins. John's readers must wrestle with a philosophical prologue of eighteen verses before he describes the ministry of John the Baptizer. Mark, on the other hand, gets right to business, launching us into the narrative like a pebble from a slingshot.

He quickly establishes the arrival of Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecies given centuries prior by Isaiah and in His own time by John the Baptizer (1:2-3, 7-8). Although Jesus bears the Spirit and is God's beloved Son (1:11), He would be subject to temptation and trial, just as Mark's ancient audience was—and as we are today. Believers under trial can find encouragement as we read about how Jesus would remain faithful and be ministered to by angels (1:13).

— 1:1 —

In the secular sphere, the verb form of the word for “gospel,” *euangelizō* [2097], was used to describe the duties of an official messenger bringing

news—usually good—concerning the progress of battle, the birth of a royal, the pending arrival of the king, or other matters. The early church borrowed this term, emphasizing the ideas of liberation and victory and applying it specifically to eternal salvation in Jesus Christ.

Though Mark describes his narrative as “beginning” the account of Jesus Christ and the gospel, the plan of God to redeem humanity from evil existed before time, space, the universe, or anything else came into being—including evil itself (cf. Rev. 13:8). The good news of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ existed in the mind of the Trinity even as God fashioned the world, filled it with life, and called His creation good.

Stop for a moment and think about that. God was not shocked by Adam’s rebellion in the Garden. The reign of sin and evil didn’t take the Creator by surprise. The Lord didn’t have to adapt His plan in reaction to the subversion of Satan. He saw it all. Satan’s sedition. Adam’s rebellion. Cain’s murder. My sin. Your sin. God saw everything before the first moment of creation, and He wove His plan of redemption into the fabric of history.

While the gospel existed before creation, God began to accomplish the plan through the work of Jesus on earth. Mark links the appearance of the good news to the official beginning of the Messiah’s public ministry. This is not just any official announcement; this good news concerns Jesus, who bears the title “Christ,” which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew title “Messiah.” Moreover, this Christ is “the Son of God,” an explicit assertion of His deity. The good news isn’t a mystery to be unraveled. The good news isn’t a philosophy to comprehend, a perspective to adopt, or a set of life principles to apply. The good news is a person. He is the long-awaited Messiah, God in human flesh, whose name is Jesus.

— 1:2-3 —

Mark didn’t write this Gospel narrative primarily to authenticate the identity of Jesus or to convince anyone to embrace Him as Savior, King, or Messiah. He wrote to a predominantly Gentile audience that had already accepted the gift of salvation from sin and identified themselves as Christ-followers. Even so, Mark linked the history of Jesus to God’s covenant relationship with Israel. After all, Jesus didn’t start a brand-new religion. He didn’t suddenly appear on the earthly stage with no prior context. His life and ministry flowed out of a long history of God’s interaction with humanity.

Because Mark's original audience was Gentile and Roman, his appeal to Old Testament prophecy might seem out of place. But these Roman Gentiles were followers of Jesus, a Jewish rabbi who claimed to be the Son of God and whose original followers affirmed him as the Messiah. Jesus validated both claims by fulfilling ancient prophecy throughout His earthly ministry and then bodily and miraculously rising from the dead.

Mark's appeal to prophecy begins with a paraphrase of Malachi 3:1 as a preamble to the oracle of Isaiah 40:3. Even Gentile Christians would have been familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures; they would have learned in their gatherings that the good news of Jesus Christ grew from the soil of God's faithfulness to Israel. While Jesus came to save people from all nations, He is the King of Israel, and His future throne on earth will be established in Jerusalem. He will fulfill all of the promises given to Israel, including the promise of land made to Abraham and his progeny.

God promised through Isaiah—as well as other prophets—that a forerunner would prepare the way for the Messiah. The exhortations “Make ready the way of the Lord” and “Make His paths straight” (Mark 1:3) refer to customs no longer familiar, but everyone in the first century would have understood them immediately. In ancient times, construction crews would arrive at a city long before the planned arrival of a king to level hills, fill ditches, clear debris, and remove obstructions in order to prepare a wide, unencumbered, straight road into the heart of town. This work also served as notice to city officials: “Prepare yourselves and your city to receive the king.”

— 1:4-6 —

John the Baptizer fulfilled this ancient promise. He was everything you imagine when you think “Old Testament prophet.” He was an enigmatic, passionate man who chose to become the very opposite of Israel's religious elite. The Sadducees, Pharisees, chief priests, scribes, and Herodians dined on the best meat and drank the finest wine money could buy. And they had plenty of money, thanks to careful bartering with Rome. John, however, ate from the hand of God, as it were. He depended on no human institution or economy, which left him free from politics and social pressures. His lifestyle choices gave him the freedom to fear no man and to fear God alone.

While the religious elite arrayed themselves in finery, John chose, instead, to wrap himself in a rough garment of camel's hair cinched

with a crude leather belt. The image recalls the apparel of Elijah (2 Kgs. 1:8; cf. Zech. 13:4), one of Israel's most courageous and revered prophets. He, too, lived off the land, beyond the reach of kings and culture.

Unlike his wealthy counterparts in Jerusalem, John called his countrymen to a “baptism of repentance” (Mark 1:4). The message proclaimed in the temple assured natural-born Jews that they had a guaranteed place in the kingdom of God by virtue of Abraham's DNA—*as long as* they faithfully kept the Law. Gentiles could receive this assurance by studying the Law, passing an exam, and (for males) submitting to circumcision. To mark their new status as adopted “sons of the covenant,” converts were baptized.

John's preaching unsettled natural-born Jews. He proclaimed that sin had separated them from God. He urged Jews to approach the Lord like Gentiles—to repent of their sins and to mark the restart of their relationship with God by submitting to a proselyte's baptism.

Make no mistake, however: The symbol of baptism cannot save sinners any more than circumcision can save Jews. Like circumcision, baptism is supposed to be an outward symbol of one's inner devotion to God (cf. Rom. 2:25-29). Even in the Old Testament, God regarded physical circumcision as worthless apart from obedience, which He described as “circumcision of the heart” (see Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25-26; and Ezek. 44:7, 9). John's baptism, like his ministry, mainly prepared people for the coming of the Christ.

— 1:7-8 —

Later in His ministry among the disciples, Jesus would say of John the Baptizer, “Among those born of women there is no one greater than John” (Luke 7:28). Few people in history have surrendered so much for so long with such intensity to serve God as John had. John was set apart for his role even before God allowed his aging, barren parents to conceive him. From birth, he observed the restrictions of the Nazirite vow (Num. 6:1-21). As an adult, he communed with God in the wilderness, denying himself the creature comforts of civilization in order to remain free of any entanglements of the world that might intrude on his singular devotion.

If good deeds and self-denial could save one's soul, certainly John would have earned his place in heaven. Yet his message shifted the focus away from any goodness he might claim so as to deliberately shine the spotlight on the coming Christ. Take note of his honest

spiritual self-assessment: “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals” (Mark 1:7).

This isn’t false modesty. This is authenticity. This is no mere magnanimous gesture. This is true humility. At best, John recognized that his deeds counted for nothing toward salvation. In speaking of one “mightier,” John didn’t have physical strength in mind; he spoke of spiritual power and moral might. Comparatively, this man—the greatest servant of God up to that time—saw his own moral might as insufficient to qualify him for the lowest form of service then known. The least of household slaves removed shoes and washed feet. (Take note, also, of Mark’s subtle message in this episode: Service to Christ is a privilege.)

Having compared his relative moral worth to the coming Messiah, John also contrasted their ministries. Perhaps standing hip deep in the Jordan River, immersing repentant Jews by the hundreds, John said to them, in effect, “I immerse you in water as a symbol of your newly restored relationship with God; the Christ will immerse you *into* God’s Spirit.” We can be reasonably certain that the implications of John’s promise were not lost on his audience. They may not have believed him, but they understood his allusion to Old Testament prophecies describing the world under the Messiah’s reign (Isa. 44:3; Ezek. 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29).



Berry Beitzel

A view from the banks of the **Jordan River**, where Jesus was baptized

— 1:9 —

Mark suddenly turns from the Baptizer’s promise of the coming Christ to Jesus of Nazareth. “In those days” marks the general time during which John preached along the Jordan and baptized repentant Jews. Some time after John’s prediction, Jesus came to be baptized.

The Son of God didn’t need to repent, of course. Unlike the other participants, he would not have confessed any sins (cf. 1:5; Matt. 3:6). So the obvious question becomes, *Why did Jesus have John baptize Him?* Matthew’s Gospel records the exchange between John and Jesus, which sheds some light on the Lord’s motivation:

John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” But Jesus answering said to him, “Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” (Matt. 3:14-15)

Like proselyte baptism, John’s baptism was an outward symbol of inward devotion to God, submission to His will, and identity with the people of Israel. This was the appropriate way for John, the forerunner, to complete his mission: by officially presenting the Messiah and then stepping aside. The fact that this event was located in the desert simultaneously fulfilled the prediction of Isaiah 40:3, mentioned above, and avoided connections with the human institution of the temple, showing that Jesus’ authority came directly from the Father (Mark 1:10-11).

Perhaps even more significant to the Lord’s plan, Jesus presented Himself for baptism in order to give the symbol of immersion in water a new meaning. Without a doubt, the significance of baptism changed on that day. With that simple ceremony, Jesus officially began a journey that would lead to His ultimate destiny—His atoning sacrifice for sin. He thus made baptism a symbolic doorway to a new kind of life, through which He would be the first to walk. On behalf of the nation, and of all humankind, Jesus received the new covenant (cf. Ezek. 36:25-28. See also Isa. 44:3; 59:21; Jer. 31:31-33; Ezek. 37:14; 39:29; and Joel 2:28-29). By our baptism into Christ, we enter that covenant and partake of all its blessings.

— 1:10-11 —

This is the first of many times (no fewer than forty-one) when Mark will use his favorite Greek adverb, *euthys* [2117], “immediately.” Sometimes we should interpret the word literally to mean the given action occurred the very next instant. Other times, however, “immediately” is merely Mark’s way of connecting two related stories or infusing a sense

of drama or surprise into the narrative. Mark's intention seems to be to show readers that the ministry of Jesus was an exciting time, often punctuated by surprising events.

In this case, the context is relatively clear. The instant Jesus came up out of the water, a physical manifestation of the Holy Spirit descended from the sky. Mark describes the visible form as “like a dove” and notes that “a voice came out of the heavens” addressing Jesus as “My beloved Son.” These two verses and their parallels (Matt. 3:16-17; Luke 3:22) feature all three persons of the Trinity. All three persons are God—the Father speaking from heaven, the Spirit descending like a dove, and the Son seeing the Spirit and hearing the voice. Without ceasing to be fully God, the three persons are distinct in that they interact with one another. In other words, God doesn't emerge from the water as the Son, race to heaven from the body of Jesus to utter His affirmation as the Father, and then fly down again as the Holy Spirit to become the Son again. On the contrary, God is shown in this passage to be three and one *simultaneously*. While we see this interchange for a mere instant, the Trinity has always existed this way. As Wayne Grudem so expertly describes the “tri-unity,”

God eternally exists as three persons,
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 and each person is fully God,
 and there is one God.⁴

— 1:12-13 —

As in 1:10, the context suggests we take “immediately” at face value. The instant the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, the Spirit “impelled” the Son to go out into the wilderness (1:12). “Impelled” represents the Greek word *ekballō* [1544], which is variously rendered “cast out,” “throw out,” “drive out,” or “send out.” Though the word lacks the finesse of our English term “impelled,” it need not be interpreted so as to leave Jesus without volition. In fact, the Son and the Spirit are one, so “impelled” is appropriate. Still, Mark's depiction is important. The Spirit of God directed the Son to go into the wilderness, and the Son obeyed.

Why is this important? Remember, Jesus is fully human. While He is nonetheless our Savior, He is also our exemplar of humanity in right relationship with God. We are not God, but we do have His Spirit living within us. Therefore, we can follow the impelling of the Spirit to do as He commands, just like Jesus.

Mark briefly described the Lord's experience in the wilderness, where Jesus was confronted by Satan and surrounded by wild beasts.

Without question, his depiction deliberately reflects the experience of Christians in Rome, who faced temptation to renounce Christ or suffer terrifying deaths under Nero's persecution. Writing around AD 100, the Roman historian Tacitus described this terrifying time:

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car.⁵

The overarching purpose of these opening verses of Mark's Gospel is to reaffirm the divine authority of Jesus Christ. Disciples preparing to face the cruel authority of Roman persecutors needed this reminder: *Do not fear Rome; our authority comes from God, who will hold Rome accountable and will minister to those who faithfully endure temptation* (cf. 1:13).

APPLICATION: MARK 1:1-13

Provision for the Wilderness

Many people who read these words understand what it means to enter a spiritual wilderness; chances are good you're one of them. If you haven't suffered the attack of Satan in the form of a distressing moral dilemma, brace yourself. You will doubtless experience one before your life has run its course. To help you endure your crisis, let me offer two simple reminders. These may appear simplistic, but—believe me—in the midst of a distressing spiritual trial, they're helpful. Write them on a card and keep them handy until you emerge victorious.

Number One: *Satan is still the enemy*. When the pain of evil intensifies, the temptation to capitulate can become overwhelming. It's also easy to forget that God is not the enemy. After all, we live in a world corrupted by sin, a world in which good people often suffer punishment for doing what's right while others prosper from doing evil. When that goes on long enough, the decision to remain faithful can begin to feel futile, even counterproductive. It's easy to forget we've chosen to fight for the winning side!

God’s Word teaches, “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (Jas. 4:7). If you don’t resist him when times get tough, he will not flee. Rather, he will find ways to take over your life. Unresolved resentments give Satan an opportunity to use you. Extended sexual lust warps the mind, removing one’s ability to discern good from bad. Unhealthy or inappropriate relationships drag you down and convince you to hurt the people you love. Cultivating a spirit of entitlement or discontent undermines your ability to trust God.

Satan is looking for channels to find his way in—not to make life better, but to steal, kill, and destroy. Never forget: Satan is the enemy.

Number Two: *The story of Jesus is still good news.* In a spiritual wilderness, when life appears bleak, we must remind ourselves that the gospel is still good news. Our Creator hasn’t left us alone. On the contrary, God Almighty became “God with us” (Matt. 1:23; cf. Isa. 7:14) when He took on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. He came to earth to redeem humanity, destroy evil, forgive sins, defeat Satan, reclaim creation, and reestablish the rule of God. We have this good news because earlier believers—like Isaiah, Malachi, John the Baptizer, and Mark—remained faithful to the Savior and His gospel.

When evil appears to be gaining the upper hand and you begin to wonder if God will indeed prevail, begin reading the Gospels. Immerse yourself in and be encouraged by the good news of Jesus Christ. Look to the perfect endurance of Jesus Christ—it is both your assurance and your calling. God has given us the same Spirit to drive us to endure, but even if we fail at this calling, Jesus’ perfect grace abounds to save us from the enemy.

Deciding to Follow Jesus

MARK 1:14-20

NASB

¹⁴Now after John had been ^ataken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, ^bpreaching the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God ^ais at hand; repent and ^bbelieve in the gospel.”

¹⁶As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and

LIT

¹⁴Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God’s Good News.* ¹⁵“The time promised by God has come at last!” he announced. “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”

¹⁶One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee,