

You Only Live Once

Dr. Maarten Kuivenhoven

Psalter 213:1–5

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 11:9–12:7

Psalter 322

Text: Ecclesiastes 12:7

Psalter 425:5

Psalter 268

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity. Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; while the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, and the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low; also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be

loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it

—Ecclesiastes 11:9–12:7

YOLO. You Only Live Once. Perhaps that's an expression you've heard before as a young person. Maybe you texted this acronym to your friend to encourage them to do something because they only live once. YOLO. It's an expression that the world attaches to its temptations. "Come on, partake of this pleasure. Try this experience. You only live once after all." But the biblical worldview also uses this expression. The Bible calls young people this morning to consider the fact that you really only do live once. You have one life. You have one life, not to pursue worldly pleasure but to pursue and live for God. That's the wisdom that Solomon provides in Ecclesiastes 11–12. It is this wisdom that we wish to consider in this message, specifically for young people, but we will also see the relevance of this Scripture for all age groups. Our theme is "You only live once," and there are two parts to the theme: (1) the rejoicing and (2) the remembrance.

The Rejoicing

Solomon provides lessons from his own life in his *pursuit of pleasure*. He provides the wisdom gleaned from his own life under the sun. Life under the sun, without God, is vanity. It is empty. It is meaningless. In verses 9–10 of chapter 11, he essentially takes the expression "You only live once" and applies it to young people. He knows the draw of the world and its pleasures. He speaks to the appeal that the years of being a young person have for you. He says in verse 9, "Rejoice, O young man [or woman], in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes." How do you understand this word *rejoice*? What Solomon introduces here is an irony. There is pleasure in life. That much is true. Solomon

is not condoning a life of reckless pleasure. He's not saying just go ahead and live it up because you're young and you only live once anyway. No, it is an irony, a warning, really. He knows that young age comes with temptations that are particular to youth. He knows the call of the world, "Come on, you only live once! You will never have an opportunity to live your youth again. Live without looking back with regrets, wishing you could have done what you wanted." He knows and relates the appeal to the senses: "Rejoice, let your heart bring you cheer, steer your desires where you want them, let your eyes consume pleasure." He's saying that youth often live this way without any thought for eternity. He's speaking to the reality that you face as a young person—the pursuit of pleasure.

What does that look like for you? How does our culture dress up this appeal to your heart to rejoice and pursue pleasure for pleasure's sake? It says that you only live once, so pursue it all. "Alcohol? Drink till you can't function anymore. Drugs? They're not so bad. How can you really have lived without smoking up, without getting a high? Sex? Throw off the shackles of a traditional upbringing. Test it out. Express yourself. Explore what makes you feel comfortable and makes you feel you. Pursue the pleasure of porn without the consequences and emotional entanglement of a relationship. How do you know who you are without sexual experimentation? Education? Open your mind to the philosophies of this age. Be woke or be canceled." Our culture and its godless ideas pressure you to rejoice in your youth and to cross over into sin.

Rejoice, O young man/woman in your youth, *but...* There's an important qualifier that Solomon introduces here. It's really a powerful inhibitor of sin, not a promoter of sin. The time of youth might be the time for the *pursuit of rejoicing*, and it is often done without thought of the *pain of rejoicing* without God. Scripture is pressing home something important for you, young man and young woman. Rejoice in your youth. Pursue pleasure. *But* know that for whatever you do in this life, you will be brought

into judgment by God. That's what is underlined in our text in verse 9. "But know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment." There is pain behind every pleasure. There is judgment behind the joy that you might expect to glean from sin. You will have to reckon with God if you pursue pleasure without thinking of God or eternity.

What Solomon says here is to warn you away from a life of reckless pleasure, of following your heart's desires, of having your behavior driven by what you see and can experience. It is a powerful warning to prevent you from going the route of sin, and it is a powerful call to repentance to those who are living in this way. Judgment will loom for a life of reckless pleasure; it might not be immediately apparent. After all, young people are invincible, aren't they? Or at least you imagine you are. Solomon thought he was invincible, but he wasn't. I thought I was invincible, but I wasn't. Learn from those who have come before. Learn from the cleansing and honest truth of Scripture. Such a life is not worth living. Is this being a killjoy, so that you can't enjoy life at all? No, not at all. Enjoyment of life without God is hellish and will ultimately face the scrutiny of God's judgment. Can you say that the way you are living right now is a life with God, a life approving to God? This statement is intended to get you to think beyond the here and now, to think about eternity, to know that your actions now will reap consequences in the future and in the coming judgment of God. Rejoice in your youth, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. Think about where you are headed this morning and receive this warning.

What should you do then? Listen to what Solomon says: "Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity." What he means here is to remove anxiety or vexation from your heart. It means to have your heart lined up so that you live with God at the center of your life. Solomon says to put away pain from your body. He means to take advantage of the years of youth when you are strong, not to live for yourself but to live for the Lord. Spend your best energies

for God, not the pleasures of the world, which if taken to their logical end will lead to eternal pain. Pursue pleasure, but with God as the bullseye of that pleasure. He is the greatest pleasure you could ever know. The time of youth without God is empty. That's the point of the Preacher.

The world says, “YOLO—You only live once, so live for the experience of pleasure.” God's Word says to you, “YOLO—You only live once, so live for God as the focus of your pleasure. Guard your heart and soul for God. Take the best years of your life and commit them to Christ and His service.”

The Remembrance

In fact, this is exactly what Solomon calls you to do in Ecclesiastes 12:1. “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth.” What does it mean to remember? To remember means “a conscious willful determination to think about something.”¹ You are to remember your Creator—the God who made you, the God who gave you life, the God who created the world around you, the God who created the pleasures, gifts, and blessings of this world. You might be tempted to think that when you are a young person, God is the great thief and killjoy who wants to spoil your life. But listen to the wisdom of Solomon. Remember your Creator. When the pressure mounts on your mind and heart to think about things that will numb you to the spiritual need of your own soul, remember your Creator.

Consciously, willfully, with determination, you are called to bend your mind to think about God. What is the opposite of doing this? Paul lays it out quite clearly in Romans 1:18–25. Those who suppress the truth of God and willfully think about other things will be forced to reckon with God's judgment. Those who worship the creature more than the Creator will face the sad reward for what they think about. It matters what you think about, doesn't it? What are you thinking about, then? What fills your mind as you

1. RHB Study Bible, Note on Ecclesiastes 12:1.

come to church? Did you consciously and willfully think about coming to worship your Creator, or did you let your mind wander in its default setting, letting it coast with your own thoughts that take you away from God?

Notice what our text says: “Remember *now*.” Not tomorrow, not an hour from now. Now means right this minute. Scripture comes with such authority to command you to remember *now*! Don’t put off this remembrance. In essence, Solomon says, “You only live once.” Don’t live for the world but live for God now. This call to remember is really a call to repentance. It is a call to turn your mind away from the pleasures of this world and living for them, to God who created you and has His claims upon you. Don’t delay this remembrance. The time of youth is the best time of life. You have strength. You have energy. You have a clear mind. You have the zeal. Take all of who you are this morning and, with determination, remember God now. Set the patterns of your mind now. Pursue the habits of grace now, lest patterns of sin overtake your mind and heart.

Why would there be such urgency to remember your Creator *now*? Because there are days and seasons coming that will seriously affect your remembrance of God. If you put off remembering God and turning to God in old age, you might not have the opportunity ever again. Why? Because old age is a period of decline—physical decline, cognitive decline, and death. That is the outlook that Solomon gives in the verses that follow. This is the entire reason why you are to remember your Creator in the days of your youth. Notice how Solomon starts to build the contrast to emphasize the urgency of knowing God when you are young, “Remember now thy Creator in the days of your youth.” This is the time for you to know God. Not tomorrow, not five years from now, not when you are done with college, not when you are married, not when you have a family. Right now is the time. You only live once. It matters what you do with your life. It matters what you do with the gospel. It matters how you handle the knowledge of God that you have. It matters what you do

with the heritage that you have received from your parents, your church, and your education. You only live once. Life is short. Eternity is long. Remember now.

Life is short. When you are young, you tend to think that life is so long. You can put off things till you're older. But Scripture is clear—there will come a time when youthful energy fades. Zeal will languish and grow cold. Strength will give way to weakness. Mental sharpness gives ways to memory loss. This is the vivid picture that Solomon paints for young people this morning so that you understand the urgency with which you need Christ now. Notice what he says in verse 1. “While the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.” The time is coming when life under the sun will lose its pleasure in old age. This period of life is old age. Conclude your spiritual state before God before the conclusion of life sets in and you will be unable to do so.

Remember now your Creator before the lights of nature are obscured by clouded vision. This is what Solomon writes in verse 2. Remember your Creator “while the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain.” What he writes here is a metaphor for the failing vision of old age. Remember your Creator now while you can read the Word and read good books and see where you are going and what you are doing. Use your vision now to put God at the forefront of your life before your eyesight fails and you can't see anything at all. You only live once.

Remember now your Creator before your strength fails. In verse 3 we read, “In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened.” It calls you, young person, to consider the decline of old age—the trembling hands, the bowed over old man, the gaps in the teeth that can't chew anymore, and the failure of the eyes to see clearly out the window. Now is the time to remember your Creator, to put Him at the center of your lives. Use

your strong limbs, your upright posture, your teeth, your eyes to remember your Creator and His gifts. You only live once.

Remember now your Creator before your hearing fails. This is the picture that Solomon paints in verse 4. “And the doors be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and the all the daughters of musick shall be brought low.” This verse speaks of the paradox of old age. The hearing is dim, and yet even the slightest disturbance awakes the elderly person. It gives a sense of insecurity, a sense of unsettledness and concern for life that is absent from the life of youth. That’s the point, isn’t it—remember your Creator before this sets in, use your ears to listen to God and glorify Him before the worries and cares of old age set in. You only live once.

In verse 5 there is a further sense of insecurity implied in old age, “Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.” In old age, life declines. There is the fear of heights, the fear of setting foot outside the home, the graying and whitening of hair implied by the almond blossom, the failing of desire for life. The destination of eternity looms large. Remember now your Creator. You only live once.

In verses 6–7, we have the picture of death that faces the elderly. “Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” Death is imminent for the elderly. It will surely come and not tarry. Are you ready for that period of life where death is close? Are you ready for death even now? You only live once.

How you live that life will determine where you will be. This last statement brings God into the picture again. “The spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” It brings you full circle to God again. That’s what the point of this passage is—to get you to reckon with

eternity and to put God at the center of your lives through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. He is coming as the Judge. He is also your Creator. All this to say that you need Him as Savior; you need to fear God with a holy and joy-filled fear in Christ. You only live once. How will you understand this statement? In light of how the world uses it and lives it up? Or how it is pressed home from the Word of God to remember your Creator now? Amen.

What Have I Done?

Rev. Ian Macleod

I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright: no man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done? every one turned to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle.

—Jeremiah 8:4–12

A few weeks ago, we looked at the life, the ministry, the reign of young King Josiah. We remember that Josiah was king at the very young age of eight, and we remember, too, that in the eighth year of his reign, he began to seek the Lord God of his father David. Then in the twelfth year of his reign, when he was either nineteen or twenty, he began a reformation in the land of Judah. Well, the prophet Jeremiah began his ministry about one year after this, so Josiah and Jeremiah are in Judah at the same time. They're contemporaries, they know each other; they're both friends and colleagues, as it were, in the work of the Lord. Jeremiah began his ministry in the year 627 BC, and so we have this time when the context is really one of, generally speaking, at least, judgment, of this coming exile into Babylon. It is in this setting that we have these two young men who are born and raised up by God into the land of Judah.

Now about five or six years after the beginning of Jeremiah's ministry, we have the discovery of the book of the law. We remember from our study of Josiah that in Josiah's reign the book of the law was discovered in the temple. Jeremiah, then, would have been early on in his prophetic ministry at that time. And we see also,

in the last chapter of 2 Chronicles, how when Josiah dies in battle, Jeremiah is there at his funeral weeping for him. That would have been, we believe, 609 BC. So all of this with Jeremiah and Josiah together is happening a little before the exile in 605 BC. About four years after the death of Josiah, we see Daniel and a few other prominent men taken away to Babylon. There are at least three waves of exile into Babylon. The first main wave really began in 597, but the point here is that the prophecy of Jeremiah comes into the context of the exile.

These are perilous times that Jeremiah is prophesying into, and his message is largely not a popular one. Chapter 1, verse 10 of Jeremiah gives the summary of Jeremiah's whole message. God says, "See, I have this day set thee over the nations." So yes, Jeremiah is prophesying in Judah, but there is a sense to which he is a prophet to the nations and over the kingdoms. Now here's the thrust of the message that Jeremiah is to bring: "to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant." You see, God had planted, as it were, His people in this land in Judah, in this land where we read that God is well-known. Here in Judah, we have the temple, the sacrifices, the worship—all the care that God has given to His people here in Jerusalem. This is the place—in the temple and from between the cherubim—that God will meet with His people. But now, the message that is coming through Jeremiah is that, because of their sin, because of the unfaithfulness of the people, there is going to be this uprooting; there's going to be this exile.

There has been a turning away from the Lord by the church as well as by the nations, and here Jeremiah is coming with this message of the Lord, to root up and to tear down. But there's also this message of mercy, this message of hope, this call to repentance, to rend our hearts not our garments. So we might go, for example, to chapter 12 and find the Lord speaking in verse 15, saying, "It shall come to pass," the same words that are used in Jeremiah's initial call. Here we are again: "It shall come to pass, after that I have plucked them out I will return, and have compassion on them, and

will bring them again, every man to his heritage, and every man to his land. And it shall come to pass, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name, The LORD liveth; as they taught my people to swear by Baal; then shall they be built in the midst of my people” (Jer. 12:15–16). So here’s the building up again, but there’s also this warning: “But if they will not obey, I will utterly,” completely, finally, “pluck up and destroy that nation, saith the LORD” (v. 17).

So as we approach chapter 8, let’s consider a quick summary of the progress of thought in the book of Jeremiah. In chapter 2, the Lord is really using the idea of His claim upon His people, which is a marriage claim. He says later, “I am married unto you” (3:14), and He speaks about the way in which they have betrayed Him, the way in which they have gone away and betrayed the great love that He has shown them. In chapters 3 and 4, then, we see God calling them to repentance, telling them that if they return to the Lord and put away their abominations, then they will not be moved; they will be planted here again. But right on the heels of this call to repentance—in the remainder of chapter 4, right into chapter 6—we have very much the atmosphere of alarm. There is the threat of judgment that is now coming right to the doors of Judah and Jerusalem, and the Lord makes it clear, essentially saying, “This is what you have done. You have brought this about because of your doings” (in Jer. 4:18). And one of the great things, the great evils, that they had done, one of the ways in which they had turned away from the Lord, was their dismissal of His prophets, their refusal to listen to His prophets. So we can go to chapter 5, verse 12, and find these words: “They have belied the LORD”—really, they’ve called God a liar and spoken falsely in the name of the Lord—”and said, It is not he; neither shall evil come upon us.” That’s what Jeremiah and the prophets are saying, but the people are saying, “It’s not true, this evil won’t come upon us, we won’t see the sword, we won’t see the famine.” “And the prophets shall become wind, and the word”—the Word of the Lord—”is not in them” (v. 13). And this refusal to listen to God, this refusal to

listen to His prophets, is the cause, the reason, why this judgment is coming upon them.

So when we come into chapter 8, we have in our passage very clearly the Lord, through the prophet Jeremiah, telling His people that the appropriate response to God's judgments is to return to Him. This is why the Lord is sending these judgments upon His people. Yes, He is displeased, but there is also this fatherly care and this call really to return to Him. I think Robert Murray M'Cheyne says something like this, that God has these two arrows in His quiver—He has His Word and He has His judgments—and we ought to be afraid, if we will not repent after hearing His Word and we will not repent after feeling and hearing His judgments. Be afraid, he says, because God has no more arrows in His quiver. Here, then, with the threat of exile looming large, God is saying to Jeremiah (and He's saying to us at this time, too) that the appropriate response to God's judgments is to return to Him.

In verses 4–6, the Lord asks a series of questions. He shows us the appropriate, we could even say the natural, the right, response by asking a series of questions. We notice in the middle of verse 4 that He basically says, If you fall down, what should you then do? What is the natural response to falling down? Well, it's to return to your feet. "Shall they fall, and not arise?" That's the natural response to falling—to get up on your feet, to return to your feet. Or then again at the end of verse 4, He gives this idea of somebody leaving home and what they do after they leave home. What do we eventually do, at least? Well, we return. We return to our home, and that's what He's saying here. Again, shall he turn away? Shall he go away and not return? That's the right response. That's the natural thing. That's the thing we expect to happen.

It's very natural to fall down and to get back up. It's very unnatural to fall down and not to try to get back up. It's very unnatural to leave home and not return. And what God is saying here, then, is this: "This is what I see in My people. Why is this?" He's asking. "I am married to them. They belong to Me, and I'm speaking to them, but they're not listening." They're not doing

what we would expect someone in that relationship to do; rather, we see the people's senseless, irrational rush to destruction.

Recently we looked at the sins forbidden in the first commandment, and one of them is being incorrigible, being incapable of being corrected. And that's what we see here in verse 5. There's this perpetual backsliding; they hold fast to deceit, speaking of the great effort that they have with this. They refuse at the end of verse 5 to return. It's incorrigible. They're incapable of being corrected. There's the idea of stubbornness here. There's the sense of the effort that they're putting in not to return. It's hard to resist all the claims of God. It's hard to totally put away His voice and the Word. We see God's providence in judgment and the people's effort, like in Romans 1, to suppress the truth and hold it down in unrighteousness.

But look at the middle of verse 6. This is what they're doing: "every one turned to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle." This is a description of the people of God, the professing people. They're following their own way of life. They're doing it in a way that cannot be stopped; or rather, they will not be stopped, like a horse rushing into battle. We can imagine a horse rushing into battle—we could try shouting from a distance to tell it to stop and to come back but it's not listening. It's rushing on. That's the picture God is painting of His people. "They're not listening to me. There's no turning. There's no deviating. There's no slowing down. They're rushing on into battle." They can't say they haven't been told. Josiah, Jeremiah, Isaiah before them, and other prophets, too, have warned them.

But in verse 6, God is pictured as looking out. He is bending His ear for the appropriate response. He is bending His ear to hear the cry or the sigh or the flicker of repentance. Verse 6, "I hearkened and heard." Even the children know that God hears everything. God hears the silent thought. God hears what we think in our minds. Of course God hears everything, but God is pictured here as bending His ear, as listening carefully for the appropriate response, the desired response of God.

Well, what is God listening for? He's listening for someone to speak aright. He essentially says, "No man, when I listened, when I heard, spoke aright, and I listened for the sound of repentance." We read in verse 6, "No man repented him of his wickedness." As if God says, "This is what I'm listening for. This is what I'm bending my ear for, but I don't hear it. No man repented him of his wickedness." He's bending His ear in verse 6 to hear if there's even somebody asking, "What have I done?" Really, it's a beautiful picture that God gives and that Jeremiah gives of the Lord hearkening and hearing. "I hearkened and I heard." He's listening carefully for the good. He's listening, He's bending His ear to hear if there's anything that is right, if there's anything that is hopeful in His people. Spurgeon says God is so attentive to everything that is good, even in the poor sinner's heart, that to Him there is music in a sigh and beauty in a tear. He says, "Ah, my hearer, you never have a desire towards God which does not excite God's hope. You never breathe a prayer towards heaven when he does not notice."

"I hearken," says God, "I heard, I bent my ear to hear." But the thing is, after bending His ear to hear, to hear if there is a sigh or a groan of His people in bondage, to hear if there is even the beginnings of a turning to Himself, a calling on His name, what does He hear? What does He find? He finds nobody who repents, nobody who, as it were, comes to their senses and says, "What have I done?"

When we fall down, we get up, we return to our feet. It's the natural thing to do. When we leave home for work in the morning, what do we do at the end of the day? We return home. It's the natural thing to do. But when God comes with His Word calling us to repent, what do we do? When God comes with judgments in the land, when God shuts down the world and shuts down so many of its idols, what do we do? God is listening. God is bending His ear to hear. Does He hear you? Does He hear me? Can He hear, as it were, a difference now in our prayers? Has there been a change, a turning to Him, a calling upon His name? Isn't that the right thing to do? We might think that that's the natural thing to

do, and yet that's really the point, isn't it? It's not a thing that we do by nature. This is the last thing we do. This is the thing we will never do indeed by nature.

Does the Lord look down and say of Grand Rapids Free Reformed at this time, when He has sent such a clear manifestation of His hand on the earth, "I hearkened and I heard. I listened carefully. I bent my ear to hear. I heard lots of other noise, but I never heard this: I never heard a cry for repentance. I never heard somebody asking, 'What have I done?' I heard plenty of people talking about what others have done, what China has done, what Russia has done, what the President has done, the sins of others perhaps a little, the sins of the nation." But the Lord is saying, "This is what I'm bending my ear to hear. This is what I want to hear. This is why I have done what I have done, so that when I bend My ear to hear, I will hear this: I will hear the ministers, I will hear the elders, I will hear the deacons, I will hear the fathers, the mothers, the sons, the daughters, the people saying, 'What have I done?'"

Revival does not begin with nations. It does not begin even, in one sense, with the church, at least not the church broadly speaking. Revival begins with individuals. It begins with me, and it begins with you. It begins with a Job saying, "That which I see not teach thou me: if I have done iniquity, I will do no more" (Job 34:32). "What have I done?" Job is asking. "If I have done iniquity, I will do no more." It begins with us crying like David, "O LORD... thou hast searched me and known me. Thou knowest mine down-sitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me. [What have I done?] And lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:1-2, 23-24).

Dear friends, it's time to be asking the question, not what has China done, not what has this side or that side of the government done, not what has anyone else done, but what have I done? And if a response would be, "Not me, pastor. Surely, we've focused our attention in the wrong place, on the wrong person. Yes, there are

things I need to work out, but surely there are bigger sins and bigger reasons and more pressing things that can be pointed out than coming to me,” the Lord anticipates the objection and brings us back to the animals in verse 7. He says, “Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow, they observe the time of their coming.” What he’s saying is that the animals, the birds, they know how to act appropriately. They know how to respond appropriately to the situation. They know it. They do it. They don’t have the ability to think and to reason things out like you and me. They don’t have reasonable souls, rational capacities for thinking, but they still act appropriately to the situation. When the weather begins to cool, when the weather suggests that winter is on its way, what do they do? They act appropriately. They fly south. They don’t delay. They don’t stay north. They don’t hope that this will just be a warmer winter. No, they go. The birds are more observant to the signs of the times than the image-bearers of God.

The Lord basically says, “My people, they can see the judgment coming if they have eyes to see it. They have heard that it is coming from My Word, but they don’t act appropriately. They think it will pass. They explain it away.” And really, the striking thing here at the end of verse 7 is the Lord saying, “My people know not the judgment of the LORD.” You see, in many ways it’s no wonder that unconverted men and women would not know the judgment of God. We can bend our ears to hear a call of repentance from them. We’re getting what we expect from them, appeals to our human spirit to stick together and we’ll get through this, we’ll be back, we’ll be bigger, we’ll be better, we’ll be stronger than ever before. That’s what we expect, but here’s the wonder to God: “My people don’t know the judgment of the Lord. My people don’t discern My own voice.”

Yes, you see, we have calls for prayer and that’s good, but I think the question is this: prayer for what? Is it prayer that we can simply return to the way things were? Is that the burden of our prayers? Is that the focus and the weight of our prayers? Yes, it’s

right to pray for people, for their lives, for their livelihoods. We pray for the peace of the city, we desire that the Lord in His mercy would remove this virus, but if that is all we are praying for and indeed, if I could be as bold as to say, if that is the burden of our prayer, then this is what God is saying to us: “My people know not the judgment of the LORD.” We are not hearing the voice of God. We’re not hearing, as Micah says, the rod and who has done it. What about asking the question in our prayers, What really caused the virus to cover the whole world? What caused this virus to shut down so many of our idols? Well, verse 6 tells us: “I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright: no man repented him [the cause of the judgment] of his wickedness saying, What have I done?”

Then in verses 8–12, the Lord essentially says that it’s not enough to have His Word. His Word must be obeyed. Now remember that Jeremiah would have been there when the Law was found in the temple and brought to Josiah. No doubt he would have rejoiced over this. This Law, the book of Deuteronomy, had been a means of bringing great reformation in the land, but it wasn’t simply the finding of the book of the law that resulted in the reformation. Josiah, we remember, had gone to Huldah the prophetess to ask what the Law meant, and Jeremiah, as the prophet of the Lord, is now the one who is going forth in his ministry applying the Law, saying not only that this is what God says but this is what God means, giving the sense of it, as Ezra says.

And there are false prophets coming in. There are so many people around Jeremiah—numerous it seems—who are “prophets of the Lord,” and yet they’re false prophets claiming to be prophets of the Lord.

And in verse 8 they’re saying, “We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us.” We have the Bible. Can’t we say that? We have the Bible in our homes. We have it in our churches. We read it here every week; I trust you read it every day. The Law of the Lord is with us. We are safe. We are good. God says that’s not enough. The pen of the scribes is in vain. They’ve twisted it. They’ve altered

it. Then, in the middle of verse 9, he says that the wise men “have rejected the word of the LORD; and what wisdom is in them?” Well, may the Lord give us wisdom to apply rightly what He has said.

What was the message that the false prophets were giving in this time of impending judgment? When God’s judgments were in the land, what was the message that the false prophets told the people? Verse 11, “They have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.” More and more, this is what convicts me. The biggest problem I have, the biggest problem in the church today is this: we don’t fear God. We don’t fear God. We don’t tremble at His Word. We don’t take His judgments seriously. We want to hear the message that says, Peace, peace. We want to hear a message even today that says, “Don’t worry, don’t fear. Everything will work out fine and right.” Well, that message will heal you slightly—superficially is the idea. It’s a kind of patch-up, a band-aid on the disease. Now of course, it’s true that for God’s people personally, in their own lives, there is this glorious message of hope, there is this covenant faithfulness of God. He will never leave His people. He does give His peace to His people. He does say, “Let not your heart be troubled,” and that is true and that is glorious, but we ought not to see that and the fear of God as two things that are somehow opposite or incompatible with one another.

Habakkuk, who is another contemporary just a few years after Jeremiah, has words of tremendous hope even closer to the exile than we are here. He speaks about rejoicing in the Lord. He speaks about joying in the God of his salvation. But in the beginning of the same chapter, chapter 3, when he sees the judgments of God in the land, when he hears the voice of God’s judgment, there is no inconsistency in Habakkuk when he says, “I heard thy speech, and was afraid” (Hab. 3:2).

“What have I done?” Well, dear friends, God is listening. God is listening to us. God is listening to me. God is listening to you, and this is what God is bending His ear to hear. Who is repenting? Who is on their knees? Who is coming to their senses in all this

and asking the question that nobody seems to want to ask, “What have I done?” Can we press that on you? Have you not heard the gospel preached, some of you, thousands and thousands of times? Have we not heard of Christ coming in our nature, of His death on Calvary’s tree, of His resurrection, of His ascension? What have we done? Have we not heard of His gospel through His messengers earnestly pleading with us, saying, “We pray you, in Christ’s stead, be reconciled to God”? What have you done? Have you believed?

Have you repented? Have you believed in the name of His Son? What have you done with this?

We have heard of the judgment seat of Christ, which makes everything we’re saying now pale into insignificance. We have heard that time is short; we’ve heard so recently that God’s Spirit will not always strive with men, and we’ve heard an echo of that sermon in this almost complete shutdown of our worship here. What have we done with that? Have we listened on with indifference? Has God been able to listen into our lives and detect a change, a response, an appropriate response, to these messages? Where we’ve heard that it is appointed unto men once to die and after this the judgment, we’ve heard that now, now, is the accepted time. Now is the day of salvation. What have I done, we ought to be asking. We’ve heard of others dying, some with a good hope through grace going into Emmanuel’s land, we believe. But we’ve heard of others dying with either little or no hope. What about you? Ought you not to be saying, “What have I done? I too must die. I too must go to the Great White Throne. I too must meet with God. What have I done?”

We’ve heard His voice again with this pestilence, this virus. We’ve heard His voice shutting us in our homes, shutting down our idols. Can God hear? Can God hear as He hearkens and as He listens in to you in your homes when you’re in your prayer closet? In the depth of your own heart, is there even the beginning of this: “What have I done? What have I done?” And let that question, then, move into this: What are you doing? What are you doing? Are you repenting? That’s what God’s looking out for. That’s what

He desires. That's why He's doing all that He's doing. Does this make us look to the Lord our righteousness, as Jeremiah goes on to speak about? God says, "I'm listening. I'm bending my ear."

And you look at the end of this chapter and I'll leave you with this: Isn't this a place to go? Isn't this a thing to do in a time like this? "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" (Jer. 8:22). What have you done with the balm of Gilead? What have you done with the Physician of souls, the Physician of the disease of sin? Oh, may God hear this very night from the bottom of your own heart these words, "What have I done?" And may He see this turning to Himself in repentance and in faith to the Great Physician and to the Great Balm of Gilead. Amen.

Introduction to the Gospel of Mark

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

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

—Mark 1:1

The early church personified the second of the four gospels and the subject of this commentary—the gospel of Mark—as a “fierce lion” because of its fast pace, emphasis on judgment, and the presentation of the Messiah as the King of glory.¹ Before commencing our study of the gospel of Mark, however, it is important to first understand the book’s *authorship, setting and audience, unique characteristics, structure, and themes*. These are the five points of this message.

The Authorship of Mark

Unlike most other New Testament books, there is no explicit statement of authorship recorded in the gospel of Mark.² However, it is evident that John Mark (or Mark the Evangelist) authored the gospel traditionally bearing his name, because the ancient church unanimously attributed the authorship of the second gospel to him, not only because he appears to have been an eyewitness of the life of Christ but also because he was a close ministerial associate

1. Benjamin Gladd, “Mark,” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2016), 61.

2. For biographical details of Mark’s life, see William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 3–10.

of the apostle Peter.³ The attribution of the second gospel's authorship to Mark can be traced to statements made by church fathers as early as Papias of Hierapolis (ca. AD 60–130), Justin Martyr (ca. AD 100–165), Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. AD 130–202), Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 150–215), Tertullian (AD 155–220), Origen of Alexandria (ca. AD 185–ca. 253), and Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. AD 260–339).

John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10) and the son of Mary, a follower of Christ who opened her home in Jerusalem as a meeting place for the fledgling church (Acts 12:12). Like many other Jews, John Mark had two names—a Jewish name, “John” (which means “Jehovah is gracious”), and a Roman name, “Mark” (which was derived from the Latin word for a large hammer). If Mark was indeed the young man referenced in Mark 14:51–52, he may have been a disciple before Christ's death and resurrection. On the other hand, he may have been an early convert under Peter's ministry in Jerusalem. Either way, Mark was well-qualified to serve as a witness to the ministry of the apostles.

In the book of Acts, Mark is described as a companion of Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey (Acts 12:25; 13:1–5). After Paul arrived in Perga in Pamphylia (modern-day Turkey), Mark gave great offense to Paul by leaving him and Barnabas to return to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). He eventually came back, however, and continued ministering with Barnabas after Paul and Barnabas separated (Acts 15:39). Although Mark and Paul were temporarily estranged, Paul later considered Mark as one of his companions during his second imprisonment in Rome (2 Tim. 4:11). Later, the apostle Peter calls Mark his son (1 Peter 5:13). According to ecclesiastical tradition, Mark established the highly influential church of Alexandria in Egypt and allegedly was martyred there during the reign of Nero in about

3. For arguments against Markan authorship and a compelling response to these objections, see David E. Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament, gen. ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 60–67.

AD 65.⁴ Clement of Alexandria reports how the gospel of Mark was written while Peter and Mark were in Rome:

So charmed were the Romans with the light that shone in upon their minds from the discourses of Peter, that, not content with a single hearing and the *viva voce* proclamation of the truth, they urged with the utmost solicitation on Mark, whose Gospel is in circulation, and who was Peter's attendant, that he would leave them in writing a record of the teaching which they had received by word of mouth. They did not give up until they had prevailed on him; and thus they became the cause of the composition of the so-called Gospel according to Mark.⁵

Mark was uniquely qualified to write a gospel account about "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1) because of his *identity*, *eyewitness experience*, and *apostolic associations*.

First, Mark was uniquely qualified to write his gospel because of his *identity*, for he was familiar with the apostles and those who had seen Christ. His mother, Mary, was an influential woman in the church of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). She was likely wealthy, as she owned a house that was large enough to host church meetings. Mark lived in Jerusalem (Acts 12:25), so he would have had the time and opportunity to become acquainted with Jewish thought and customs. He possibly had firsthand exposure to the ministry of the Lord Jesus in Jerusalem, but he certainly would have heard much in his formative years about the mighty works and words of Jesus—the divine Prophet from Nazareth. Mark's cousin, Barnabas, was an influential leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 4:36; Col. 4:10). Perhaps this family connection explains why Barnabas

4. Eusebius, *The Church History of Eusebius*, 2.16, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1890; repr., Edinburgh: T & T Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 116; John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of the Church*, ed. M. Hobart Seymour (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1856), 4; Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 48–50, 53–60.

5. Eusebius, *Church History*, 2.15.1. The translation cited here follows William Hendriksen, *Survey of the Bible: A Treasury of Bible Information*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 373.

avored taking Mark on his second missionary journey with Paul despite Paul's objections (Acts 15:37).

Second, Mark was uniquely qualified to write his gospel because of his plausible *eyewitness experience*. Mark's account of Christ's ministry includes a fascinating incident that is not recorded in the other gospels. We read that in the garden of Gethsemane, "there followed him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young men laid hold on him: and he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked" (Mark 14:51–52). It is likely that Mark was describing himself in this comparatively minor incident, for he could not have learned of this incident from apostolic eyewitness when the apostles fled.

Third, Mark was uniquely qualified to write his gospel because of his *apostolic associations*. He had a close relationship with Peter, the apostle to the Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:8). Mark's association with Paul began when Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to deliver gifts from the Christians of Antioch for the relief of suffering Judean believers during the "great dearth throughout all the world" in those times (Acts 11:28; 12:25). Afterward, Mark returned to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

When the church sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, "they had also John [Mark] to their minister" (Acts 13:5). The word "minister" here is translated from the Greek word for "under-rower" (*huperete*), an oarsman who rows a boat under the orders of another. In other words, Mark was a servant under the orders of a superior. Thus, Mark's early association with Paul was as the apostle's assistant or aide. Paul and Barnabas had observed such qualities in Mark that they believed he had considerable potential for ministry and could exercise his gifts of service in a supportive role.

On Paul's first missionary journey, Mark disappointed and offended his apostolic associate by returning to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Mark's departure was apparently not honorable, for Paul apparently thought poorly of Mark's decision to leave, vehemently

opposing Barnabas's plan to take Mark on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:36–40). The contention between Paul and Barnabas was so sharp that they felt compelled to separate from each other, so Barnabas continued ministering with Mark while Paul began traveling with Silas.

Eventually, Mark redeemed himself in Paul's eyes when the apostle most needed faithful companions. When Paul was first imprisoned in Rome, he wrote to the Colossian church concerning "Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, (touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, receive him)" (Col. 4:10). In this passage, it is as though Paul says, "If you have heard that I had misgivings about the fitness of this young man to be trusted with church responsibilities, let me inform you that my judgment has changed. This man is with me; I commend him to you. If he comes, receive him without further enquiry."

We find a similar statement in Paul's letter to Philemon: "Salute thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow labourers" (Philemon 23–24). Paul insisted that Mark was worthy to be included in the list of those who were to be welcomed and honored (or "saluted") in the churches as faithful servants of God. During Paul's second imprisonment, the apostle reaffirmed his favorable judgment about Mark. In his letter to Timothy, he wrote, "Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11).

What encouraging lessons this account offers us! God can work restoration between believers and church leaders despite their differences. He can work through human weakness, so that even tactical disagreements between ministers and missionaries can expand rather than impede or hinder His mission.⁶ How great our God is!

Mark was not only close to the apostle Paul; he was also close

6. Jacob Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 409.

to the apostle Peter, who called him his son, or *huios* (1 Peter 5:13). Paul used a similar word (*teknon*) for Timothy, Titus, and Onesimus, among others (1 Tim. 1:2, 18; Titus 1:4; Philemon 10). For Paul, a son was one whom he had begotten through the gospel, or one who had believed in Christ through his preaching (1 Cor. 4:15). Likewise, Peter identified Mark as one begotten to new life in Christ through his proclamation of the gospel and testified that Mark in return honored him like a son should honor his father.

Mary, the mother of Mark, was a generous hostess to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). Peter's prominent influence in that church, as well as his reference to John Mark as his son, implies that Peter greatly influenced Mark's early spiritual development and may have been the human instrument of his conversion.

Furthermore, the early church fathers unanimously testify that Mark, at certain periods in his life, was the traveling companion of Peter. Mark became the recorder of Peter's method of presenting the gospel, which has led some to declare that Mark's gospel could just as well be called "The Gospel According to Peter." In about AD 140, Papias, the bishop of the church at Hierapolis in modern-day Turkey, wrote, "Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered. It was not, however, in exact order that he related the sayings or deeds of Christ."⁷ In the same century, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote, "Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter."⁸ Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that "Mark's Gospel contains the kind of account of Jesus which Simon Peter himself used to give in his preaching."⁹

7. Papias of Hierapolis, *From the Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*, chapter 6, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 154–55.

8. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 414.

9. Sinclair Ferguson, *Let's Study Mark* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), xiv.

Mark's gospel, then, is inseparable from Peter and his preaching. However, Mark was not simply Peter's stenographer. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Mark used material and narratives from Peter and organized them both chronologically and theologically to provide his own distinctive emphasis.¹⁰

Several applications emerge from our observations on Mark's authorship of the second gospel. First, *treasure the special providence of God* who prepares human instruments for specific tasks. Mark's birth and nurture in a Jewish family, his association with Peter and Paul, his tragic defection from missionary work, and his subsequent restoration to the ministry are all beautiful displays of the almighty God's work in preparing Mark to write his gospel. We should worship the God of special providence who wonderfully prepares His servants for the tasks to which He calls them.

What was true of Mark is also true of us. Our age is one of instant information and instant gratification, so we often question when God appears to delay His promises. However, well-formed, spiritually mature Christian character never comes in the form of instant packages. God seldom is in a hurry to mold a man or woman into a mature servant of God. The God who took years to form Moses in the back side of the desert, David in the wilderness of Judea, and Paul in Arabia is the God who patiently molds and matures His people through successes and failures, for His glory.

At times, God weaves threads into the fabric of our lives that seem to be made of thorns. Only years later, when the thorns have dried and dropped off, do we see that the threads were gold at the core. As God weaves each dark thread into the tapestry of our lives, it is arrogant to say to Him, "What doest thou?" (Dan. 4:35; cf. Rom. 10:20, 21). It is not our task to discover what God is doing in particular (John 13:7), but to trust by faith that all things work together for good to those who love God (Rom. 8:28). God is committed to make us like His Son and to fit us for our calling and task, whatever that might be.

10. Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 67.

Dear believer, you are no less loved in the eternal counsel of God than was Mark. Christ did not shed His blood any less for you than He did for Mark. God's purposes for Mark were no more wise or more gracious for him than they are for you. With this perspective, we stand with Mark under the radiant countenance of a gracious God who declares to His children, "All things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28).

Second, *treasure the special grace of God* that prepares a person for the specific task to which God calls him—even through his personal failures. We saw that Mark deserted his mission while under apostolic authority. When he was praying with other believers in Antioch and discussing the forward thrust of the gospel, his calling to the mission field no doubt sounded glamorous—even romantic. Before long, however, he realized that preaching the gospel in a hostile, sin-loving, and flesh-indulging world is both difficult and dangerous. To proclaim to heathen men and women that their hearts are full of iniquity is risky business. It is even riskier to tell proud, religious Jews that they are on the broad path to hell unless they repent and embrace the crucified Nazarene as their Savior and Lord. In the thick of battle, Mark smelled the smoke, saw the blood, and decided to run home.

After Mark's desertion under pressure, Paul refused to give Mark a second chance. As we read in the Proverbs, "Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a broken tooth, and a foot out of joint" (Prov. 25:19). It is as though Paul says, "I am not going on this journey with Mark, for he is a foot out of joint and a broken tooth. This young man does not have the stamina to persevere; he is a quitter."

However, Paul later writes in his last letter to Timothy, "Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11). Likewise, Paul writes to the Colossians, "If [Mark] comes to you, welcome him" (Col. 4:10). The Bible proclaims the wonderful doctrines of both *forgiving* and *restoring* grace in the precious blood of Jesus Christ. God declared through the prophet Joel, "I will restore to you the years that the locust

hath eaten” (Joel 2:25). The prophet Joel says that the children of Israel have come under the judgment of God because of their sin, but God will send an army of locusts that will strip everything bare, until Israel sees nothing but barrenness. But then the LORD adds, “Turn ye even to me with all your heart...and I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten” (Joel 2:12, 25).

Mark is a beautiful example of this wonderful promise. In His grace, God takes failures like Mark and makes such people useful in His kingdom; the Lord even used Mark to write one of the four gospels. For a time, it appeared that Mark abandoned the faith and loved this present world like Demas, who Paul likewise considered his fellow-laborer for a time (Philemon 24). Yet by His grace, God restored His erring servant. Mark’s restoration ought to *comfort* us. Dear believer, you may feel like nothing is left after years of ravaging locusts. You may feel like Mark on the night he was suspected of being an associate of Jesus and fled in cowardice and shame; perhaps you feel like Mark felt when he considered the time that he deserted Paul on the mission field and felt broken before God. After coming under Spirit-worked conviction of sin, it is often difficult to believe that God can ever use you again.

Every time you open the gospel of Mark, then, let this message penetrate the depths of your soul: God is the God of both forgiving and restoring grace; otherwise, there would be no gospel according to Mark. If Mark’s failure had disqualified him from further kingdom service, he would not have had the intimate association with Peter and Paul that equipped him to write this gospel. So every time you open this gospel, cry out, “There is grace, amazing grace, for second chances and more, even for sinners like me who have repeatedly failed.”

True conviction of sin should not paralyze us; rather, it should drive us away from sin to Christ. When we have found forgiveness in Christ, we will not wallow in self-pity but be energized to serve the Savior who so graciously forgives us and restores us.

Third, we learn vital lessons from Mark’s life about the *development of leadership in the church*. When we look at others who are

nominated for leadership, we are prone to err in our assessment. Some might think that a young man like Mark—with his background, privileges, and friendship with Peter—should not just be an “under-rower” by the time we meet him in Acts 13, but a man with authority who is giving orders. We may be prone to push promising young men into positions of leadership too quickly, forgetting Paul’s exhortation, “Lay hands suddenly on no man” (1 Tim. 5:22). On the other hand, some of us may tend toward the opposite extreme. When a young man shows considerable promise but collapses under pressure, we are ready to dismiss him altogether. The example of Mark guards us from both extremes. If leadership means we must use only those who have never known the discipline of failure, then the church would be greatly impoverished: consider the lives of Abraham, Moses, David, and Peter!

The Setting and Audience of Mark

Much ink has been spilled over the date of Mark’s gospel. Scholars who believe it was the first gospel written tend to date it to the middle of the first century. Other scholars argue that Matthew was written before Mark and tend to date the second gospel to the mid-60s AD.

There are persuasive reasons to consider the later date for Mark as more accurate. For example, topics like persecution and martyrdom feature prominently in Mark’s gospel (4:16–17; 6:25–28; 8:31–38; 9:41, 49–50; 10:32, 38–39; 13:9–13), so it was probably written during a time of intense persecution—likely after Nero’s persecution of Christians began in the mid-60s. However, the gospel was likely written before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, for it does not include prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem.¹¹

After a devastating fire swept through Rome in AD 64, rumor

11. Garland, *Theology of Mark’s Gospel*, 68, 81–82. For a helpful discussion on dating Mark’s gospel, see D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Leicester, U.K.: Apollos, 2005), 179–82.

spread that the fire was part of Nero's plan to revitalize the city. Nero unsuccessfully attempted to extinguish the rumors by blaming Christians for the fire. According to the ancient historian Tacitus (AD 56–ca. 120), Nero “inflicted the most cruel tortures” upon Christians. As a result, “their death was turned into a diversion. They were clothed in the skins of wild beasts, and torn to pieces by dogs; they were fastened to crosses, or set up to be burned, so as to serve the purpose of lamps when daylight failed.”¹²

Confessing Christ during Nero's persecution meant certain death. To encourage believers, Mark describes how Jesus faced the most severe persecutions: he relates how Jesus faced “wild beasts” in the desert (1:13), was falsely reported to be in league with Satan (3:21, 30), was accused of capital crimes by false witnesses (14:56–59), was betrayed by an intimate friend (14:43–46), and ultimately was delivered into wicked hands to be crucified (15:15). He suffered all these things so His people could obtain forgiveness of sins, and to give them strength to endure persecution (13:1–13), to strengthen others in the faith, and to triumph over conditions that would become increasingly grim.¹³

In a wide sense, Mark's target audience is all mankind—both Jew and Gentile—for he presents the good news of Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners and the Lord of all. In a narrow sense, Mark likely wrote his gospel from Rome, as Eusebius of Caesarea claims (and as suggested by 1 Peter 5:13)¹⁴, with a special desire to attract Romans (and indeed all Gentiles) to the faith of Jesus. Mark omits the genealogies of Christ, which would be far more interesting to

12. George Gilbert Ramsay, trans., *The Annals of Tacitus: Books XI–XVI* (London: John Murray, 1909), 281.

13. Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 29–31. R. C. H. Lenski raises the real possibility that Mark himself “was with Peter in Rome and witnessed his death” in 64 AD. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964), 8.

14. Eusebius, *Church History*, 2.15.1. That Mark wrote in a Roman environment is also probable because of his frequent use of Latinisms. For examples, see Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 70–80.

Jewish people but quite irrelevant to a Roman audience. Mark also quotes the Old Testament much less than Matthew, who wrote primarily for a Jewish audience. Unlike Matthew, Mark consistently explains Hebrew terms and Jewish customs. For example, he assumes that his readers are unfamiliar with the customs and beliefs of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mark 7:3–4; 12:18). Mark also translates Aramaic sayings (Mark 5:41; 7:11, 34; 15:22, 34), which suggests that his audience did not understand Aramaic.¹⁵

On the other hand, Mark assumes that his readers know people living in Rome, such as Rufus the son of Simon the Cyrenian (Mark 15:21). Mark also highlights positive examples of Gentile believers, including the faith of the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30) and the testimony of the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross (Mark 15:39). Mark emphasizes that the gospel must be proclaimed to all nations and “throughout the whole world” (Mark 11:17; 13:10; 14:9). Mark’s rapid-fire action would appeal particularly to the Roman mind and temperament. Throughout his book, Mark compels Gentiles to consider the claims of the Lord Jesus.¹⁶

At the same time, however, Mark appears to be writing for “an audience familiar with Scripture and the gospel story.... Isaiah is mentioned without explanation, as are Elijah, Moses, and David.... Also, the audience also does not need explanations for the various titles used for Jesus in the gospel, such as Christ, Son of Man, son of David, and Son of God.”¹⁷ This presumed familiarity with the Old Testament accords with the account of Clement of Alexandria, who recorded that Peter introduced his Roman listeners to the Scriptures and the gospel.

Mark demonstrates that *the gospel is one*—for Jews and Gentiles alike. It is one in every age, and must be proclaimed to believers and unbelievers alike. There has only been one gospel

15. Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 69.

16. Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 69.

17. Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 69.

from the moment God came to fallen mankind in the garden of Eden with the first gospel promise (Gen. 3:15). It is a gospel of sovereign divine initiative in saving sinners of mankind.

But that first gospel promise comes to full fruition in the Gospels, which tell us how the Lord Jesus came into the world in due time, lived and died, and was raised from the dead. Mark illustrates well what Paul declared in his letter to the Corinthian church. “I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). Mark’s manner of expression was well-adapted to the circumstances around him so that he could preach the gospel to people from many nations.

Nothing and no one but the Christ of Mark’s gospel can meet your need. The Christ who did everything Mark says He did—who died and was raised from the dead—has commissioned His people to preach the gospel to every creature. No matter who you are, you will one day face the Christ of Mark’s gospel as your Judge if you are not in a saving relationship with Him. If that describes your situation, then your eternal portion will be weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13:42)!

The Unique Characteristics of Mark

In the last chapter, we visited an art gallery. Without lingering on one painting in particular, we quickly walked down four rows of art entitled “Matthew,” “Mark,” “Luke,” and “John.” We considered how the writers of the Gospels were creative artists who each portrayed the teachings and acts of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, in his own unique way. Focusing now on the second row of art, we will consider three unique characteristics of the gospel of Mark: his gospel is deed-focused, fast-paced, detailed, and often paradoxical.

First, Mark emphasizes *deeds over words* in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. All of the gospels contain what Luke described in the prologue to Acts as “all that Jesus began both to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1). What makes Mark’s gospel distinctive, however, is that it emphasizes the deeds of the Lord Jesus more than His words.

Though Mark does indeed record the words of Jesus, including some lengthy discourses, he is less concerned about presenting the Lord Jesus as a powerful preacher than as a mighty worker. In Mark, Jesus is the one who by His unique person, identity, and mission subdues hearts to Himself, conquers demonic powers, forgives sin, and calms the raging seas. Mark emphasizes Christ as the mighty servant of Jehovah, the Son of God and the Son of Man, who by His actions meets the deepest needs of suffering, sin-bound, and crippled humanity.

In our day of pragmatism, the questions that Mark answers are extremely relevant: Is Christ enough to meet all our needs? Does His gospel work? The answer in Mark's gospel is a resounding yes, for Christ is the mighty Worker. There is no evil raging in you today that His power and word of grace cannot subdue. There is no sin you have committed that He cannot confront and say, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee" (Mark 2:5). There is no raging storm in your life that He cannot still, for He is the Creator and Lord over all (Mark 4:41).

Second, Mark is full of *rapid, intense action*. Mark's narratives have a quick, even staccato character. That is evident from Mark's constant use of the conjunction *and* (*kai* in Greek). Just when it appears that an exciting paragraph is ending, Mark inserts another "and" so that his audience is carried along into another intense action. Through this conjunction, Mark piles one deed of Christ on top of another.

In the first half of the gospel of Mark, Jesus and His disciples move quickly from one dramatic event to another with scarcely any pause between them. In the second half, culminating with Jesus's crucifixion, Mark often tells us exactly what hour it is in these days of overwhelming suffering for our Lord.¹⁸

Furthermore, Mark's emphasis on action is evident in his repeated use of the word "straightway" (*euthus*). Notice how many times this word is used in the first chapter alone: "And

18. Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 89–90.

straightway coming up out of the water (1:10); “And immediately [straightway] the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness” (1:12); “And straightway they forsook their nets” (1:18); “And straightway he called them” (1:20); “Straightway on the Sabbath day” (1:21). Almost half the uses of “straightway” in the New Testament are found in Mark’s gospel.

Mark’s emphasis on the intense activity of Christ as God’s mighty servant-worker teaches us that it is possible to live a busy life, full of God-honoring activity, without becoming frenzied. Mark demonstrates that, despite the intense activity of Christ’s life, He did not become so consumed in His work that He neglected intimate communion with God as the source of His effectiveness. What a model Christ is for us!

Mark also proclaims to us that the Savior who we so desperately need is never too weary to help us. When sinners of all kinds come to Him with all their needs, He will never say, “Enough! The burdens of lost and confused humanity are too much for Me!” Mark says that Christ did one deed after another—“straightway.” If that was true in Christ’s state of humiliation in the flesh, how much it must be true of Him in His glorified body, exalted and freed from all limitations. By His Spirit, who takes the things of Christ and applies them with power to our hearts, Christ can meet all the needs of all who come unto God by Him.

Fourth, Mark offers *touching, minute, vivid details*. Mark’s gospel shows more than it tells. As J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) writes:

Vividness of description is obtained by many minute touches that are lacking in Matthew and in Luke. Mark alone tells us that the paralytic was “borne *of four*” [men] (Mark 2:3), and that before the storm on the lake Jesus was in the stern of the boat *on a pillow* (4:38). Mark alone mentions *the age* of Jairus’ daughter (5:42) and gives *the original Aramaic* form of the words by which Jesus raised her up (5:41). Mark alone speaks of the *green grass* upon which the five thousand were made to sit down (6:39). Mark describes the healing of the epileptic boy after the

transfiguration with *a wealth of detail* that is absent from the other gospels (9:14–29).¹⁹

These detailed, vivid touches in the gospel of Mark seem to confirm the tradition that Mark gleaned much from Peter as an intimate eyewitness of these events. Mark also refers to the looks, gestures, and emotions of Jesus more than any other gospel writer. He speaks about Jesus's indignation (3:5), sighing (7:34), and sorrow (14:33–34). His touching details regarding Christ's non-verbal responses ought to reinforce the conviction that Jesus Christ is a Savior and Lord who is full of compassion (1:41; 6:34) and perfectly suited to our needs as one "touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Heb. 4:15).²⁰ Everything about Him provides reason to trust Him more implicitly and to love Him more dearly.

Finally, Mark offers *mysterious enigmas, profound paradoxes, and unresolved questions*. Garland has rightly pointed out that these elements in Mark are a sign of the author's theological depth. He says that in Mark, more than in the other gospels, "Jesus is revealed paradoxically through secrets." Consequently, "many remain blind. The disciples receive special coaching from Jesus, but their growth in understanding progresses at a snail's pace, and they seem to fail utterly at the end. Ironically, the revelatory moment occurs when Jesus dies and his chief executioner recognizes him to be truly the Son of God."²¹

The Structure of Mark

However one structures the book of Mark, it focuses on the deeds (primarily) and the words (secondarily) of Jesus Christ, particularly during His Galilean ministry. Three chapters (almost twenty

19. J. Gresham Machen, *The New Testament: An Introduction to Its Literature and History* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 203. Emphasis added.

20. Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1964), 178.

21. Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 42–43.

percent of the Greek word count) of the gospel focuses on the passion week.

It is also helpful to divide the gospel of Mark into five sections:

1. The introduction to His public ministry (1:1–13)
2. His ministry around the Sea of Galilee (1:14–chapter 5)
3. His further journeys in Galilee (chapters 6–9)
4. The Judean period of His ministry (chapters 10–13)
5. His passion, death, and resurrection (chapters 14–16).²²

Mark did not intend to provide an exhaustive or comprehensive treatment of the life and work of Jesus. In fact, he passes over Jesus's birth, childhood, and early ministry in Judea. Various deeds and sayings of Jesus that are grouped together in other gospels are omitted in Mark's gospel. Mark concentrates heavily on Jesus's ministry north of Jerusalem, in the area of Peter's hometown of Capernaum and around the Sea of Galilee. This is what we would expect if he indeed received detailed accounts about Christ's deeds directly from Peter.

Like the other gospel writers, Mark concentrates attention on the end of Jesus's life. He draws us into the mighty Worker's mightiest work in which He gives His life a ransom for many. Mark sets Christ's final sufferings and death before us as the culmination of His ministry. Every mighty work Christ performed prior to the cross validated His identity as the Son of God. But His death on the cross together with His resurrection offer us a sure hope for salvation and eternal life.

The Themes of Mark

In his gospel, Mark primarily portrays Christ according to His humanity. The first major theme of Mark's gospel is the *good news of Jesus Christ—the Son of God, the Son of Man, and the Suffering*

22. Joel R. Beeke, Michael P. V. Barrett, Gerald M. Bilkes, and Paul M. Smalley, eds., *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 1412.

Servant of the Lord—who unveils His glory in His works and words to save people from sin.

Second, Mark emphasizes Jesus's *active power and compassion shown through His miracles*. Though Mark's gospel is short, it contains accounts of eighteen miracles—more than any other gospel. These miracles demonstrate that Christ is both Son of God and Son of Man. He is powerful and compassionate and is both willing and able to save sinners. He is an active Savior who always stands ready to help the needy. He is almighty in His works and able to save anyone, despite their sinful past. He heals both soul and body.

Finally, Mark's gospel focuses on *servanthood and discipleship*. Mark speaks often about Jesus as the Servant of His Father and His people. He, as the Servant of the Lord, calls others to be His disciples, to serve Him and others by His grace and example.

Consequently, Mark focuses much on discipleship, its duties and requirements, and its costs and rewards, especially in chapters 9 and 10. As Garland observes, Mark particularly stresses that “the invasion of the kingdom of God into this world brings with it enormous claims on individuals who must radically restructure their lives according to God's will.” Mark emphasizes that “the kingdom of God confronts humans in the person of Jesus and meets with a divided response. Some submit; others try to repel the invading King. Some will take up their cross, and follow Jesus; others will desert him, deride him, or try to destroy him.” Ultimately, to be a disciple of Jesus means to take up one's cross and follow Him in doing the will of God, which, “in its most radical sense means being willing, like Jesus, to accept even suffering and rejection as being willed by God.”²³

Conclusion

Mark is the shortest of the four gospels. It contains about 660 verses, of which some six hundred (or about ninety percent) are also found—partial or complete—in Matthew, and about 380 in

23. Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 46.

Luke. It was the Lord's will that the words and deeds of Jesus should be reported to us from four perspectives. As Cornelius Vanderwaal wrote, "Each gospel writer, because of his own individuality, brings different facets to the fore. Each of the four books follows its own plan and has its own purpose. When we look at something stereoscopically, the two converging points of view sharpen our perceptual judgment. When it comes to Christ, we are allowed to look at him from four separate points of view. Doesn't this enrich and deepen our knowledge of him?"²⁴

Mark shows Jesus as the God-man, the Servant of the Father, the one who makes Himself of no reputation and yet is the King of the Father's kingdom, so that His glory makes devils tremble, adversaries plot and scheme, and Gentiles bend the knee before Him.

As Thomas Bernard (1815–1904) summarizes: "It is plain that the four [gospel] histories are modified by their own instinctive principles of selection and arrangement, which do not indeed announce themselves, and almost elude our attempts to ascertain them, but yet result in giving four discriminated aspects of their common subject, as the royal Lawgiver [in Matthew], the Mighty Worker [in Mark], the Friend of Man [in Luke], and the Son of God [in John]—four aspects, but one portrait; for if the attitude and the accessories vary, the features and the expression are the same."²⁵

The call to be a servant of God is Christ-centered, entailing radical self-denial and an intense pursuit of conformity to Christ's image. This call rings with the authority of Jesus Himself. It is universal, coming to everyone who hears the gospel while warning them to count the cost. It is challenging, insisting that nothing in us or of us can remain undedicated to Christ. Mark stresses that discipleship involves a radical transformation that causes believers to increasingly grow in eight gracious qualities: surrender to God's will; faith in God through Christ; communion with God through

24. C. Vanderwaal, *Search the Scriptures* (St. Catharines, Ont.: Paidia Press, 1978), 7:8.

25. Thomas Dehany Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*, 5th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1900), 37.

prayer and meditation on His Word; watching and guarding the heart; humble servanthood and teachability; forgiving others; taking up the cross of temptation and persecution; and confessing Christ to those around us.²⁶

As we consider the gospel of Mark, let us pray that the Holy Spirit would bless these messages to our minds and souls so that we would be single-minded disciples of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to the glory of God and to our own spiritual health. Through this study, may God be glorified as the one who is worthy of praise now and forever. Amen.

26. Hans F. Bayer, *A Theology of Mark: The Dynamic Between Christology and Authentic Discipleship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2012), 99–124. Cf. D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 101–2.