JEREMIAH
BIBLE STUDY SERIES

MARK

THE MESSIAH IN ACTION

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INTRODUCTION TO
The Gospel of Mark

"When [Paul and Barnabas] arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God . . . they also had John [Mark] as their assistant" (Acts 13:5). John Mark was not one of Jesus' original disciples, but he was present at the birth of the church and had a strong relationship with Peter. Luke writes that the early church gathered to pray in Jerusalem at the home of Mary, who was "the mother of John whose surname was Mark" (Acts 12:12). At the time, King Herod Agrippa, the ruler of Judea, had just put the disciple James to death. He intended to do the same with Peter, but God sent an angel to free the disciple from prison. Later, Peter was put to death during the reign of Emperor Nero. It is likely Mark decided at that time to record everything Peter had told him about Jesus and create his Gospel account of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

AUTHOR AND DATE

The Gospel of Mark, as with the other three Gospels, does not list the name of its author. However, the earliest church fathers to mention the Gospel all concur it was written by John Mark. Papias, who lived c. AD 60–163, was the first to write, "Mark, who became Peter's interpreter, wrote accurately, though not in order, all that he remembered of the things said or done by the Lord." Irenaeus (c. AD 130–202) wrote, "after [Peter's] death, Mark . . . himself also handed down to us in writing the things preached by Peter." In addition to this evidence, it seems unlikely the church would assign authorship of the Gospel to Mark—who was not

prominent in the early church—unless there were historical reasons for doing so. It is likely that Mark was the first Gospel to be written, sometime between AD 65 to 70, from the city of Rome.

Background and Setting

Mark appears to have written his Gospel during a time of great turmoil for Christians in the Roman Empire. In AD 64, the Emperor Nero blamed the Christians for a massive fire that devasted the city of Rome . . . a fire that historians believe *he* had likely ordered to be set. During the persecutions that followed, both Peter and Paul were put to death. Mark appears to have written his Gospel to Gentile believers in Rome to encourage them to persevere in their faith in Christ. This is seen in the fact that Mark often uses Latin expressions instead of their Greek equivalents, translates Aramaic terms for his readers, feels the need to explain Jewish customs, and quotes infrequently from the Old Testament. Mark's Gospel also focuses on the *power* of Jesus as the Son of God—a topic that would have impressed a Roman audience.

Key Themes

Several key themes are prominent in Mark's Gospel. The first is that *Jesus used His power to minister to others and serve them.* In the first-century Roman world, it was the job of slaves (those at the lower rungs of society) to provide service to those in power. But Jesus, the all-powerful Son of God, flipped this paradigm on its head by coming into the world not "to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Mark also shows how Jesus instructed His followers to take after their Lord and do the same.

A second theme is that *Jesus was the long-expected Savior of the world.* In one key passage, the disciple Peter acknowledges Jesus as "the Christ," which translates to the Hebrew word for *Messiah* (8:29). Previously, God had affirmed Jesus as His own Son (see 1:11), and the demons had

recognized the same (see 3:11), but this is the first time in Mark's Gospel that we find one of Jesus' own followers confessing that He is the Messiah. This theme culminates in a scene that takes place at the foot of Jesus' cross, when a Roman centurion who has witnessed the execution of Christ declares, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (15:39).

A third theme is that *Jesus will reward those who persevere in their faith.* As previously mentioned, Mark wrote his Gospel during a time of persecution against Christians in the Roman Empire. Mark wanted to show his readers that Jesus predicted such times of suffering and plainly stated the cost involved in following Him. In one passage, Mark quotes Jesus as saying, "It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire—where 'their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched'" (9:47–48).

A fourth theme is that *Jesus was fully God and fully man.* As apostles such as Peter and Paul began to be executed for their faith, there was a need to record their teachings and recollections of Jesus for future generations of Christians. Mark also seems to be concerned about addressing certain false teachings that had arisen in the church, such as those that emphasized Jesus' divinity at the expense of His humanity. Mark wanted to show his readers that Jesus was fully God but also fully human . . . as evidenced in His suffering at the cross.

Key Applications

Mark shows us that no matter how chaotic our world becomes, we can always cling to the *hope* and *peace* that we have in Jesus. Even in the darkest of times, we can rely on the *light of Christ* to see us through. And while the path to following Jesus is not always easy, it is always *worth it.*