

# News of the Hour

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**Mark's Gospel**

*by Peter Bolt*

&

*Tony Payne*

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**MATTHIAS MEDIA**

News of the Hour

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St Matthias Press Ltd. ACN 067 558 365

Matthias Media

PO Box 225

Kingsford NSW 2032 Australia

Ph: (02) 9663 1478

Fax: (02) 9663 3265

International ph: +61-2-9663 1478

International fax: +61-2-9663 3265

Email: [info@matthiasmedia.com.au](mailto:info@matthiasmedia.com.au)

Internet: [www.matthiasmedia.com.au](http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au)

Distributed in South Africa by:

Christian Book Discounters

Ph: (021) 685 3663

Email: [peter@christianbooks.co.za](mailto:peter@christianbooks.co.za)

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ISBN 1 876326 00 X

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Cover design and typesetting by Joy Lankshear Design.

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# *How to make the most of these studies*

## **1. What is an interactive Bible study?**

These ‘interactive’ Bible studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. The studies will take you through Mark’s Gospel, pointing out things along the way, filling in background details, and suggesting avenues for further exploration. But there is also time for you to do some sight-seeing of your own—to wander off, have a good look for yourself, and form your own conclusions.

In other words, we have designed these studies to fall half-way between a sermon and a set of unadorned Bible study questions. We want to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do a lot of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

## **2. The format**

Each study contains sections of text to introduce, summarize, suggest and provoke. We’ve left plenty of room in the margins for you to jot comments and questions as you read.

Interspersed throughout the teaching are three types of ‘interaction’, each with its own symbol:



### **For starters**

Questions to help you think about society and your own experience, in a way that tunes you in to the issues being raised by the Bible passage.



### **Investigate**

Questions to help you investigate key parts of the Bible.



### **Think it through**

Questions to help you think through the implications of your discoveries and write down your own thoughts and reactions.

When you come to one of these symbols, you'll know that it's time to do some work of your own.

## **3. Suggestions for individual study**

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in Mark's Gospel and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. You may be spurred to pray again at the end of the study.
- Work through the study, following the directions as you go. Write in the spaces provided.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the *Think it through* sections. It is important to think about the sections of text (rather than just accepting them as true) and to ponder the implications for your life. Writing these things down is a very valuable way to get your thoughts working.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you've learnt.

## 4. Suggestions for group study

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and threesomes. Get together with a friend/s and work through them at your own pace. You don't need the formal structure of a 'group' to gain maximum benefit.
- It is *vital* that group members work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how side-tracked you get!), but only if all the members have done the work and are familiar with the material.
- Spend most of the group time discussing the 'interactive' sections—*For starters*, *Investigate* and *Think it through*. Reading all the text together will take too long and should be unnecessary if the group members have done their preparation. You may wish to underline and read aloud particular paragraphs or sections of text that you think are important.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining important sections of text to emphasize, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of Mark's Gospel, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

For more input:

- See 'Tips for leaders' on page 87.
- There is also a series of audio cassettes available which expound the relevant passages—see page 91 for more details.





**Mark 1:1-15**

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## *At that time, Jesus*

Was Jesus a great prophet and teacher? Was he merely one in a long line of inspired individuals, including Buddha and Mohammed? Did he travel to England as a child? Is he more popular than the Beatles?

These days, it seems possible to find as many different Jesuses as brands of softdrink. Every year there's another book about the 'authentic' Jesus. All the authors have their own theory and they all present it as the most obvious and plausible one. Most have this in common: they disagree with traditional Christianity. How do we deal with this huge range of opinions?

Jesus was an historical figure who lived and died in the first century. He was also a powerful teacher who, in the centuries following his lifetime, has influenced the lives of millions of people from many different nationalities and personal backgrounds. No serious-minded person would disagree with these statements. Yet the full meaning and significance of Jesus remains a contentious issue. Who was he really? And what was he really on about?



### **For starters**

What do people say about Jesus? What opinions do you hear in the media, at work, around about? On what do people base their opinions? Jot down a few answers.

If we want to know the truth about Jesus, there is only one place to turn. We must read and study the Gospels, for they are the only reliable source of detailed information about him.

The Gospel of Mark is probably the earliest of the four Gospels, and was written while many of those who were involved in the events (as participants or eye-witnesses) were still alive. It is a remarkable book, and not only because of its subject matter. The more we read Mark's account of Jesus, the more we are entranced by what a great story it is, and by how well it is told.

It must be said at this point, that many of us are not used to reading Mark's Gospel (or any of the Gospels for that matter) as one continuous *story*. Instead, we are more used to regarding the Gospels as a collection of lots of different stories that don't have much to do with each other. We're familiar with stories about healings and exorcisms, about John the Baptist, about miracles and parables, about arguments with Jewish leaders, and of course about Jesus' death and resurrection. Yet many of us have grown up with these Gospel stories without pausing to think that there might be a connection between all these different incidents, that the Gospel author might be trying to tell a big story of which all the different episodes are only part.

We can be like people who only know a movie by the trailers they see on TV. We have a rough idea what it is about, and have

seen the highlights, but we haven't yet grasped how the whole thing holds together, and what the overall point is. In fact, we aren't even sure which movie the episodes come from, since there are four versions of Christ's life, each written from a slightly different perspective, and each containing particular emphases.

These studies are like a trip to see one of these 'movies': the Gospel of Mark. We're not going to simply look at a grab bag of highlights. We're going to see how the whole story fits together, how the characters relate to each other, how one episode flows into the next, and how Mark presents us with a unique portrait of Jesus.

As we do so, we'll see that the Jesus of Mark's Gospel is not only surprising and intriguing—he also fulfils all our grandest dreams.

Let us begin where all stories begin: at the beginning.

## **The beginning of the Gospel**

According to its opening words, Mark's book will tell its readers about "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Mark is written for those living after the time of Jesus, to tell them how the Christian message originated. Where did it come from, this 'good news' about a crucified Messiah? What were the events that started it all? Who was this Jesus? What was he on about? And what was he supposed to have done?

Mark immediately identifies Jesus as 'the Christ' and 'the Son of God'. We are so used to these words that we barely pause to consider what they mean. However, for Mark's original readers, these were words full of significance.

'Christ', for example, is not Jesus' surname. It is a title for the long-awaited King of Israel ('Messiah' is the same word in Hebrew.) In the Old Testament God had promised that this king would one day come to defeat all Israel's enemies, and to bring in a new age of prosperity and peace.

The 'Son of God' basically means the same thing. It was another of the titles given to the Kings of Israel, and so is another way of referring to the Christ or Messiah. It is a somewhat confusing title for Christians because we are used to calling Jesus 'God the Son'—that is, the second person of the trinity. But these are two slightly different things. God the Son has always been at the Father's side, from all eternity. When Jesus was born as a man, and lived and died and

rose from the dead, he *became* the ‘Son of God’—that is, he became the long-awaited Messiah or Christ of Israel.

From the outset, then, Mark tells his readers something that the characters in the story (like the disciples) will take some time to discover. We know from the start that Jesus—the central character—is the Christ (or Messiah), the Son of God. From the start, we know that this is no ordinary story, but concerns the king of all the earth!

## **What happens next**

The royal coach, pulled by four immaculate horses, draws up to the entrance of the great hall. The red carpet is out. Dignitaries wait nervously in the hope of recognition, or even a handshake. The crowd strains forward to catch a glimpse. The footman opens the door and out steps...

We all know what happens next. We all know who to expect. The signs and trappings of royalty are unmistakable.

Yet when Jesus began his public ministry, what did people expect? What were the signs? Was the red carpet out?

Jesus the Messiah certainly did not arrive in a vacuum, unexpected and unannounced. On the contrary, he had been expected for hundreds of years. And if we are to understand anything about Jesus, we must understand something of the expectations that surrounded his arrival, and the kingdom he would bring.

In fact, Mark begins his story by telling us from the Old Testament just who was expected, and what was meant to happen once he arrived.

## What happens next...according to the Old Testament?



### Investigate

Read Malachi 3:1-5. (Mark 1:2 is a quote from Malachi 3:1)

1. What does Malachi prophesy will happen first?

2. What is supposed to happen after that?

Read Isaiah 40:1-11. (Mark 1:3 is a quote from Isaiah 40:3)

3. What does Isaiah prophesy will happen first?

4. What is supposed to happen after that?

5. How would you summarize the promise of these Old Testament verses?

## What happens next...according to John

As soon as Mark finishes quoting these prophecies, he introduces John the Baptist (Mark 1:4-8).



### Investigate

Read Mark 1:4-8.

1. Why did the people come to John? What were they looking for?

2. John is portrayed by Mark as the ‘messenger’ of the Old Testament prophecies. According to John’s message, what will happen next?

3. According to the Old Testament prophecies we looked at above, who was supposed to come after him?

### ‘Baptism in the Spirit’

Two common mistakes can be made here. The ‘baptism in the Holy Spirit’ is neither referring to Christian baptismal practices, nor to what pentecostals refer to as ‘the second blessing’. Both mistakes try to read later church phenomena back into the Gospel. Instead, we must understand John’s reference to baptism in the light of the situation in Jesus’ time. Notice that John compares a symbol (what he does)

with the reality (what the stronger one will do). ‘Baptism’ simply means a washing, which is a natural symbol for cleansing or purification. ‘Baptism in the Holy Spirit’ is the cleansing or purifying that God will do. This is what people wanted (1:4-5), and what the Old Testament had promised. Later on, Jesus will reveal that the ‘baptism’ he performs according to God’s plan is his death (10:38, 45).

## What happens next...according to God

The words are barely out of John’s mouth, when Mark introduces the very One John had been speaking about:

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. (Mark 1:9)

In a dramatic scene, Jesus is endowed with the Holy Spirit and hears a voice from heaven, saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased”.

This short sentence seems a straightforward thing to say. God is declaring from heaven that he loves his Son, and that he is very pleased with him. But there is more to it than that. God is repeating words that he had spoken many hundreds of years earlier in the Old Testament. God is quoting from two Old Testament passages, one about his Son whom he loves, and another about a ‘servant’ who would receive the Spirit and be well-pleasing to God.



### Investigate

Read Psalm 2.

1. What should happen once God’s Son, the king of Israel, is established on his throne?

Read Isaiah 42:1-4.

2. When the Spirit-filled servant arrives, what will happen next?

3. There are three other passages about this servant in Isaiah. Quickly read them. What do they tell us about the ministry of the Servant?

Isaiah 49:1-7

Isaiah 50:4-11

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

## **What happens next...according to Jesus**

In this climate of expectation, with all these promises and prophecies in the air, and with John the Baptist pointing to him as the One they'd been waiting for, Jesus begins to proclaim his message: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15).

According to Jesus, the time has finally come. The prophecies are about to be fulfilled. The long-awaited kingdom is near. And since this is all about to happen, it is a time for urgent and immediate action.

According to Jesus, two things will happen next: 1) the kingdom will come; and 2) his hearers will have to make their minds up how to respond—either accepting his message (by repenting and believing) or rejecting it.



### **Think it through**

1. If someone asked you, “Who is Jesus?”, how would you reply? How has this study affected your answer?

2. Imagine that you have never read Mark’s Gospel, nor even heard the story of Jesus. What do you expect to happen next as Mark’s Gospel unfolds?

3. Why should every person alive take a good look at Jesus?



# 2

**Mark 1:16 – 3:35**

## *As one who had authority*

So far in Mark's Gospel, we have been awaiting the arrival of the king. Mark has told us from the outset that his book is all about Jesus, the king, the Messiah. We have been reminded of the Old Testament expectations, and heard the testimony of John the Baptist and even God himself at Jesus' baptism.

Now the king has stepped from the carriage onto the waiting red carpet and announced his arrival ('the kingdom of God is near'). One thing remains: What will the king do? How will he act? How will he wield his royal power?

In this next section of Mark's Gospel, we not only begin to see the royal authority of Jesus the Messiah in action, we also see him start to interact with his subjects. Mark introduces us to the different characters who will figure in the dramatic story to follow.

### **Four encounters with authority**

#### **Investigate**

(If you are studying in a group you may like to break into four groups and take one of the following passages each, then report back.)





3. *The sick*

Read Mark 1:29-39.

a. How is Jesus' authority shown in this section?

b. From Jesus' actions and words, what did he think his mission was all about?

4. *The leper*

Read Mark 1:40-45.

a. Why do you think the leper was hesitant about asking for healing?

b. What do you find surprising about this incident?

c. What does Jesus' encounter with the leper tell us about the sort of king he is?

These passages certainly show what a remarkable person Jesus was. The fishermen left their ordinary life, their work, their family, and at this stage they did not even know where Jesus was heading! There must have been something compelling about Jesus to command such a response. Obviously his healings drew people's attention—but notice that although Jesus was able to heal, and had sympathy for the ill, it was not his primary interest. He left the huge crowd to go further afield with his preaching about the coming kingdom (vv. 38-39).

In many respects, we modern readers are distracted by the fact that Jesus could heal at all. We are so struck by his power, that we can easily overlook how astounding it was for him to *touch* someone with leprosy, someone defiled and 'unclean' under the religious law of the time. The leper certainly did not expect it; he doubted Jesus' willingness to heal (not his ability).

Jesus has already been contrasted with the religious leaders of the day (v. 22). In the next series of stories, this contrast becomes open conflict.

## Authority opposed



### Investigate

Read Mark 2:1-12.

1. What is the source of Jesus' authority?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What is Jesus' authority for?

3. What were the responses to Jesus' words (and the actions that backed them up)?

The 'Son of Man' is the way Jesus refers to himself. It could be that this is just a roundabout way of speaking, much as one can use 'one' in referring to oneself. It is hardly a coincidence, however, that the 'Son of Man' was also the name given to a man in Daniel 7 who came to God (v. 13) and was given the kingdom of God (v. 14; cf. Daniel 2:44). He therefore had authority over all people.

4. Read the following passages in Mark and fill in the table

	<b>What opposition does Jesus face?</b>	<b>(If relevant) How does Jesus answer the opposition?</b>
2:13-17		
2:18-20		
2:23-28		
3:1-6		
3:20-21		
3:31-34		

To sum up: what is the difference between Jesus' attitude and that of his opponents?

Read Mark 3:22-29.

In this scene, the religious leaders oppose Jesus to his face. They question the source of his authority (vv. 22, 30).

5. How does Jesus' riddle answer their charge (vv. 23-27)?

6. Why does Jesus give them such a stern warning (vv. 28-30)?

### **Blaspheming the Holy Spirit**

This passage has often worried Christians. "What if I blaspheme the Holy Spirit?"

We need to look carefully at what is actually being said. Jesus was accused of being from Satan. This is utter blasphemy, for Jesus' authority does not come from Satan, but from God. Jesus is the one upon whom the Spirit came, the Son, the Servant of the Lord (1:9-11). If people reject him, they "blaspheme the Spirit". Jesus is the Son of Man, with the authority to forgive sins on earth (2:10). If the religious leaders reject him, they reject the only source of forgiveness and will therefore remain guilty of eternal sin.

### **Reacting to authority**

The people of Jesus' day were confronted with a choice. They had traditionally found out about God by following their authorised religious leaders. But now a new teacher had arrived on the scene, one who oozed authority in everything he said and did. How would they react? Would their amazement lead them to "repent and believe the good news", as Jesus had challenged them to do?

These are the questions waiting to be answered as we read on.





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48 pp.

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