

“The Purpose of Life”
Mark 10:35-45 (NRSV)

Some years ago, one of the world’s most renowned scholars of the classics, **Dr. E. V. Rieu**, completed a great translation of Homer into modern English for the Penguin Classics series. He was 60 years old, and he’d been an agnostic all his life. The publisher soon approached him again and asked him to translate the Gospels. When Rieu’s son heard this he said, **“It will be interesting to see what our father will make of the four Gospels. It will be even more interesting to see what the Gospels make of our father!”** (J. B. Phillips, The Ring of Truth, 1967, p. 74). He didn’t have to wonder very long. Within a year’s time Rieu responded to the compelling story of the Gospels he was translating and became a committed Christian. His story is a marvelous testimony to the transforming power of God’s Word. Experiences like that have been repeated time and time again.

Whenever I start a fresh study of one of the Bible’s books, I keep this story in mind, and especially questions like: **What will it make of me? What will it make of the people I seek to influence and inspire?** My own personal experience has been (and I think for many others it is the same) that when I’ve finished studies of sections of the Scripture, I wasn’t the same person when I began. Positive changes have taken place in my understanding and practice of the Christian faith. That was true when I first heard Bible stories being read from a Bible storybook, after supper, as a young child, and later as a young teenager. That was also true when I first read the entire Bible for myself, in the old KJV, using Scripture Union Notes as an aid to interpretation, in my mid to late teens. That was also true when I studied the various parts of the Bible in a different, more searching way, as a theological student. And that is still true every time I study and prepare a portion of the Scripture on which to preach. So I ask, with expectation: **What will this series of sermons on Mark’s Gospel make of you and me?**

1. Mark is generally considered to be **the oldest of the Gospels**.

A careful synoptic study of the New Testament will allow one to discover that Matthew and Luke made such a great use of it in writing their own Gospel accounts that, between them, they reproduced all but a few verses of Mark’s! So in this Gospel we have for the very first time in history a systematic account of the life and words of Jesus. Mark was the first of a

distinct and original literary form that we now refer to as **“Gospel”** or, essentially, **a story of “Good News.”**

2. Also intriguing, I think, is **the identity of the author of this Gospel.**

The text of the Gospel itself doesn’t specifically identify anyone as the author. Yet, by the second century the name of **“Mark”** had come to be associated with it. Tradition has it that it was written by **Mark**, Peter’s “son,” who simply recorded what his mentor preached in Rome (1 Pe. 5:13). This person, was also, in turn, identified with **the “John Mark” of Acts** (12:12, 25), who, as a young man, had a shaky beginning when he abandoned Paul on the apostle’s first missionary trip and decided to return home (13:5-13). Paul was so unhappy with Mark that he refused to take him on the second journey, thus beginning a bitter quarrel between Paul and Barnabas, which ended with Paul and Silas going one way and Barnabas and Mark another (15:37-39). Although details are lacking, Paul and John Mark later reconciled when Paul was in prison in Rome, and Mark served as Paul’s aide, and then as a delegate on an important mission to Asia Minor (Philemon 24; Col. 4:10). Later, Paul would ask Timothy to bring Mark back with him to Rome because he was “useful” in service (2 Tim. 4:1).

For more scholars with a more liberal bent, it seems **unlikely that all of these “Marks” were the same Mark**, much less the author of this Gospel. They contend the name “Mark” appears frequently in the Roman world and there would’ve been a strong desire to associate this Gospel with someone close to Jesus. It was also common in this age to attribute writings to important figures of the past in order to give them more authority. There is also evidence that the author of Mark may have been Jewish or had some Jewish background. Some scholars believe that Mark may have worked in a place like Tyre or Sidon.

In spite of that, the Christian tradition associated with this Gospel dates back pretty far – at least to some writings of **Eusebius** in AD 325, or even earlier. **Eusebius of Caesarea, a native Palestinian, was an early “church historian” and bishop.** Although many scholars today might not consider him to be an entirely trustworthy source, he does, in turn, claim to be relying upon work from an earlier writer, **Papias, a bishop of Hieropolis, in southwestern Turkey**, who wrote this around the year 120:

Mark, became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord [himself], nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, he followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so [he wrote down] single points as he remembered them...

(Kirsopp Lake, trans., The Ecclesiastical History, vol. 1, Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1965, p. 297, III, XXXIX 15)

So, too, **Clement of Alexandria**, who died in AD 212, and **Irenaeus, a bishop of Lyons in Gaul**, who died in AD 202, are two other early church leaders who supposed a Roman origin for Mark because he appeared to calculate time by a Roman method, and used certain Latinisms – loan words from Latin to Greek – in his writing .

If it is true that this Mark, John Mark, is the author of this Gospel, what a recovery Mark made! He rose from being a failed follower of Jesus Christ, to become a devoted disciple, the premier biographer.

A poet named **J. Sidlow Baxter** once wrote:

They on the heights are not the souls
 Who never erred or went astray,
 Or reached those high rewarding goals
 Along a smooth, flower-bordered way.
 No, those who stand where first comes dawn
 Are those who stumbled but when on
 (Explore the Book, 1975, p. 271)

3. **The context in which John Mark would've written was dramatic:**

The time in which John Mark lived and wrote in Rome was a miserable time. It was right after the death of Peter and the Neronian persecution, sometime between AD 60 and 70. According to the Roman historian **Tacitus**, the Emperor Nero made the Christians into scapegoats for his burning of Rome and butchered them wholesale so that the Church was driven into the Catacombs on the outskirts of the city (William L. Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 1975, p. 15-16).

4. The purpose of Mark's Gospel:

The purpose of Mark's Gospel was **to encourage the Gentile church** in Rome. He wanted them to see **Christ as the Suffering Servant Saviour**, and so arranged his material to show Christ as the One who speaks and acts and delivers in the midst of crisis (Lane, p. 25). Mark has no long genealogy (as Matthew's Gospel does), no birth narrative (as both Matthew's and Luke's Gospel do), and only two of Jesus' long presentations.

Jesus Christ is all action in Mark's Gospel! Mark uses what scholars have termed "the historical present tense" 150 times. **Jesus comes, Jesus says and Jesus heals – all in the present tense.** There are more miracles recorded in Mark's Gospel than in the other Gospels, despite its being far shorter. Everything is given to us in vivid, but clipped "Eyewitness News" detail. It's like **"reality TV"**! Things are **fast-paced**. Jesus Christ is **always on the move**. Mark uses the Greek word for **"immediately"** (the familiar, but archaic KJV "straightway") some 42 times. (There are only seven occurrences of this word in Matthew and one in Luke.) The conjunction "and" – much like in Hemmingway's powerful story of The Old Man and the Sea -- is unusually frequent (beginning twelve of Mark's sixteen chapters) and adds to the rush of the action. **Jesus Christ's life is portrayed as being super-busy**; he even had trouble finding time to eat (3:20; 6:31)! It sounds a lot like our world, doesn't it?

It takes a slower reader **about two hours to read Mark's Gospel** through at a single sitting; and, if you take the time, you will feel surrounded by the crowds, wearied by all kinds of demands, and besieged by the attacks of troublesome demons. You are also brought face to face with the human emotions of Jesus, and the astonishment of the multitudes at his teaching, his power and authority. **Mark is the "Go For It Gospel"**; the Gospel of the Servant Saviour who is willing to go just about anywhere for us and with us.

The acknowledged key verse, the one which summarizes the Gospel of Mark, is found in chapter 10:45: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." This verse is part of the answer to the question, "What will the gospel make of us?" A devoted reading or hearing of it will make us servants, like the Master, effective servants who do not run on theory, but on action. Jesus Christ was and is **"the Christ for every crises!"** Power attended his every action. The same Christ brings power to life now, and a serious study of Mark's Gospel today

will bring that power further to our lives if only we want it and allow it to happen.

5. **The disciples' failure to learn the servant approach (10:35-40).**

The irony is this: though Jesus had been with the disciples for three years as the ideal Servant, though the end was near, and he had just given them a detailed forecast of his death (10:33-34), and though he had taught them that his way was to be the model for their lives, the disciples (represented by James and John), now made a request which revealed their way of thinking was virtually the opposite of their Lord.

Their request was outrageous. As they, too, saw the end of all things coming, **they wanted to make sure that**, if it came to dying with Jesus in some final conflagration, **they'd have adequate provision in the kingdom to come**. They wanted to be sure that they'd be given heavenly places of power right beside their Lord: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (10:37). Perhaps they wanted to "ace Peter out" because they figured he'd, no doubt, try, according to his usual nature, to go for the top position. So they approached Jesus privately, quietly, on the side. Matthew's Gospel tells us that they even had their mother do the talking (20:20-21)!

They just didn't get it. Despite their association with Jesus, and despite their piety, these disciples saw greatness according to the world's definition. A bit later (10:42), Jesus described the world's viewpoint: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them." James and John had fallen for the world's way of seeking personal advantage and authority.

It's so easy to succumb to such thinking as **Robert Raines** mused:

I am like James and John.
 Lord, I size up other people
 in terms of what they can do for me;
 how they can further my program,
 feed my ego, satisfy my needs,
 give me strategic advantage.
 I exploit people, ostensibly for your sake,
 but really for my own.

Lord I turn to you to get the inside track
 and obtain special favours,
 your direction for my schemes
 your power for my projects,
 your sanction for my own ambitions,
 your blank cheque for whatever I want.
 I am like James and John.
 (Creative Brooding, 1966)

But, of course, the Lord wasn't going to leave James and John, or the rest of the disciples for that matter, in their delusion. So he began to dialogue with them, once again probing the naivete and shallowness of their thinking.

Naturally, the other ten learned what James and John had attempted in pretty quick order, and a major blow up ensued.

6. **The Lord's rebuke of his disciples** (10:41-45).

Jesus called them all together and, in a few brilliant moments, set them – and, consequently, all of us -- straight: People like to go for the best spot, “But it is not to be so among you; ... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must become slave of all” (10:43-44). And then he gives us the ultimate rationale for taking up a servant position: “For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45).

The kind of service Jesus is referring to is **the most common service, the kind of service parents or children, or waiters render at the table** when we're having something to eat and drink together (cf. a parallel passage in Lk. 22:27). When someone else serves us, it enhances our experience of the meal. It allows us to be free to visit with and enjoy the company of others. **Jesus didn't mind being the waiter**; in fact, he insisted on it. The best example we have of that is when he took a towel and washed the disciples feet before they had communion together (Jn. 13). Serving others. That's what Jesus does for anyone who calls him Lord. That's what Jesus wants us to do for each other.

The logic is this: if the One who was present at the creation of the supernovas of the universe and the fireflies that lighten the darkness became our servant, our willing waiter, how can we do less?

In 1878 when William Booth's **Salvation Army** had just been so named, men [and women] from all over the world began to enlist. One man, who had once dreamed of himself as a bishop, crossed the Atlantic from America to England to enlist. He was a Methodist minister, **Samuel Logan Brengle**. ... he'd turned from a fine pastorate to join Booth's Salvation Army. He [later] became the Army's first American-born commissioner. But at first Booth accepted his services reluctantly and grudgingly. Booth said, "You've been your own boss too long." And in order to instill humility into Brengle he set him to work cleaning the boots of other trainees. And Brengle said to himself, "Have I followed my own fancy across the Atlantic in order to black boots?" And, then, as in a vision, he saw Jesus bending over the feet of the rough, unlettered fishermen. "Lord," he whispered, "you washed their feet; I will black their boots" (Richard Collier, The General Next to God, 1965, p. 72).

The "Son of Man," the Man for all of us, came, not to be waited upon, but to wait on us, and to give his life as a ransom. Therefore, how can we still seek so much to serve ourselves?

Jesus has thrown open a competition, in which there are no winners and losers, a competition which has no charm for many people today. But the rewards of this race are beyond imagination. We become **Christlike**.

The Gospel of Mark can bring about a profound commitment to **servanthood**; reading and appropriating it can also bring about a profound experience of God's active power in our lives. It is the Gospel of miracles, the Gospel of power, the Gospel of service. May it rub off us! May the Gospel of our Lord make something out of us! May it give us true meaning and purpose.

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
 Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC
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