

The Passion Narrative of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark
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The Gospel of Mark has often been called “a Passion Narrative with an extended introduction”. Of the sixteen chapters in the Gospel of Mark, the first ten chapters deal with the three-year ministry of Jesus from Galilee on the road to Jerusalem. Beginning with the eleventh chapter the action slows, and the focus is on the last week in the life of Jesus. The week begins with the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem with the crowds crying, ““Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Recall how at the end of the tenth chapter Blind Bartimaeus on the way to Jerusalem calls out to Jesus and proclaims his identity as the Son of David who is about to enter the city of David.) The same crowd that hails his entrance into the city will demand his crucifixion before Pilot.

Throughout these chapters there is a great emphasis on the contrast between the role of the Temple and the ministry of Jesus. In Mark’s narrative style we hear the story of the cursing of the fig tree interrupted by the declaration that the Temple has become a hideout for robbers and the next morning the fig tree has withered and died (Mark 11:12-20). The way to the Kingdom is through Jesus and not empty religious ritual.

Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard which lays out what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. The tenants of the vineyard have rejected and killed the servants (prophets) of the owner. When the owner (God) sends his son to collect what is due, the tenants kill him as well (12:1-12). This parable and the teachings of Jesus astonish the crowds, but they enrage the religious and political leaders of the people. They ask Jesus questions in order to trip him up and find a reasons to arrest him. They ask about the authority of John the Baptist, marriage in heaven, and the greatest commandment. He answers sincerely and exposes their hypocrisy.

The thirteen chapter of mark is often called the “Little Apocalypse” because it deals with the persecutions that will come up his followers and it also deals with the end time and the return of the Son of Man (see Daniel 13:7-14). The emphasis is upon the truth that no one knows when these things will take place. The command to those who follow Jesus is to watch and wait.

In the fourteenth chapter, we have the story of the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus announces that the disciple will fall away, and he will be betrayed by one of them. Peter declares he will remain faithful to the end. Judas

conspires to betray him. In the Garden, Jesus, knowing what lies ahead, wrestles with his destiny. He prays those poignant words, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I will but what you will.” It has been said that Jesus was no more fully human than when his will and God’s will were perfectly aligned.

Jesus is crucified as the King of the Jews. The details of his trial, crucifixion and death reflect and draw upon the imagery of the Fourth Servant Song in Isaiah (52:13-53:12). The servant of God bears the sins and grief of the world without complaint like a lamb led to the slaughter. When Jesus cries from the cross, “My God, my God, what have you forsaken me,” he is reciting the first words of Psalm 22 which ends not as a cry of despair but as an affirmation of the faithful deliverance of God. At the crucifixion, Jesus is abandoned by the disciples. Yet, a group of faithful women who have followed Jesus all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem remain as witnesses to his death. It is the Roman Centurion at the foot of the cross who discloses for all to hear what has been hidden and only partially known throughout the Gospel. Jesus is the Son of God.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Mark’s Gospel is the way he tells the story of the resurrection of Jesus and the empty tomb.

Mark 16:1-8 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. ⁶ But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Although Mark does not tell us, we assume the women go back to Galilee and share the news. There, back home, they will meet the risen Lord Jesus. After reading Mark’s Gospel, can we go back to all the places we have been and all the experiences of our lives and see how the Risen Lord has always been and will be among us? Do we see him now?