

The Greatest Story Ever Told

In 1989, a pop group called Depeche Mode released a hit song called “Your Own Personal Jesus”. Some of the lyrics went like this:

Your own personal Jesus
Someone to hear your prayers
Someone who cares
Your own personal Jesus
Someone to hear your prayers
Someone who's there

The song was about being like a god in someone else's life. But that phrase – 'your own personal Jesus' is exactly how many people think of Jesus Himself. Too many people have personal Jesuses. They pick up a cliché about Jesus here, and an anecdote about Jesus there, a sweet PowerPoint slide presentation with Jesus in it there, and a flea market portrait of him here. They snatch a bit of Jesus from a two-paragraph devotional book, and bit of Jesus from a movie they have seen. The resulting picture is an eclectic Jesus, like one of those mosaics or collages you made at school out of pieces of magazine or newspaper scraps. He might not resemble the Jesus of history, or even the Jesus of any particular religion – but He's your own personal Jesus.

Practically, it results in people making Jesus in their own image, turning him, as the song said, into their own personal Jesus – an invisible friend to talk to, a caring therapist, a genie for wishes, a spiritual guide. And in our culture, people no longer believe that there is a true Jesus and false Jesus – Jesus is whatever you want Him to be. You do exactly what I've described: pick things out about Jesus that you like, combine them and make your own personal Jesus. For many people, they don't care whether their Jesus matches any Jesus in reality. For them, their personal Jesus is their reality, and nothing else matters.

In contrast to this kind of thinking, the Bible has given us eyewitness accounts of the historical Jesus Christ. The authors of the New Testament were convinced that there was a true Jesus, and that true faith, and even eternal life depends on knowing this true Jesus. So much so, that Paul once wrote to a group of Christians in Corinth that he was worried that if: *“he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached...you may well put up with it!”* (2 Cor 11:4) In fact, it was exactly because in as little as 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, people were beginning to concoct their own versions of Jesus, that the eyewitnesses and their associates began writing down the life story of Jesus. Like any biography, they are meant to be read from start to finish to understand who Jesus actually was and is. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are not disconnected proverbs about Jesus. They are accounts, narratives that tell the greatest story ever told – the life of the most important Man who has ever lived – Jesus Christ.

And there is a special word that has come to be used of these authoritative eye-witness accounts of Jesus Christ, and you'll find it in the very first verse of Mark.

Mark 1:1 *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

The gospel. *Gospel* comes from the Anglo-Saxon – godspell, meaning good news, which is a good translation of the word in the original Greek. Gospel = Good News. It is the good news of Jesus Christ. What is the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God? What is the news, and why is it good?

In order to understand what the news is and why it is good, we need to do a large fly-over of the

whole book. Before we get into the details, we want to see the big picture, the satellite map of the whole things. If we understand what Mark is doing, where he is going, we will understand the whole story. Instead of being like people who steal just a page or two out of the book of Jesus' life and come up with their own personal Jesus, we can sit in Mark's car from the start of the journey to the end, and understand where he is taking us and why. We can understand what we are seeing, when we see it.

So, in order to understand this gospel, we are going to consider several stages in the life of Jesus as seen in the gospel of Mark. If you learn and keep these things in mind, you'll be able to read Mark not as a collection of anecdotes about Jesus, but as a fast-paced, carefully crafted life-story of Jesus Christ. The first stage in the life and ministry of Christ we could call:

I. The Public Presentation of the Son 1:21-28

Mark 1:21-28 ²¹ Then they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught. ²² And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Now there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴ saying, "Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are -- the Holy One of God!" ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" ²⁶ And when the unclean spirit had convulsed him and cried out with a loud voice, he came out of him. ²⁷ Then they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." ²⁸ And immediately His fame spread throughout all the region around Galilee.

Notice what Jesus does here. He goes into the synagogue and teaches, as well as shows power. He is not hiding Himself or trying to remain in obscurity. He is deliberately going public.

After the baptism of Jesus, Jesus began nothing less than a massive campaign to present Himself to all of Israel as her Messiah. The first 2½ years of Jesus' ministry was when Jesus went from village to village, town to town, going into the synagogues to teach, making claims about Himself, and then backing up those claims with countless miracles. Jesus was quite simply saturating the land with His reputation. He is allowing news of Himself and who He claims to be to spread into every nook and cranny of Israel. These first 2½ years are summarised by Mark in his first eight chapters. All that you are reading in those first eight chapters is Jesus going public with His claims.

What were the claims He made?

Mark 14:61-62 ⁶¹ But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" ⁶² Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

During His public ministry, Jesus made two very clear claims concerning Himself. He claimed to be the Messiah of Israel (the Christ), and He claimed to be God come in the flesh. This is what Jesus meant when He told people to believe in Him.

Try to imagine how hard it would have been for people to believe this. Here is a man from the obscure town of Nazareth, the son of a poor carpenter family. He doesn't look different to anyone else. He doesn't have an army. He doesn't walk around with a sword or a bronze bow. He does not look at all like what the Jews were expecting in a Messiah. The Messiah was supposed to rescue Israel from being under the thumb of other countries. The Messiah was supposed to restore the national and political honour and supremacy of Israel. Messiah was supposed to restore Solomon's kingdom. Jesus did not do those things, and yet He made it clear that He was the promised Messiah.

On the other hand, the claim to God in the flesh was unbelievable and scandalous to the Jews. They had never imagined that God could be incarnate. But Jesus made it very clear that He was God in flesh.

In both cases, both claims could have gotten Jesus in a lot of trouble, from two different groups. The claim to be the Messiah King of Israel would have caught the attention of the Romans like a motion sensor catches the slightest movement and sets off the alarm. Any talk of a king that the Romans could sniff out would have had him quickly arrested. So that is why Jesus makes his claims in ways that are unmistakable to Jews, titles like 'Son of Man', but would have meant very little to Romans.

The claim to be God would have had him tried for blasphemy from day one. So once again, Jesus put it in ways which were clear to those who were listening. He knew that Jews understood that God was eternal, so when He said that "Before Abraham, I AM", He was claiming deity. He knew that the Jews believed God to be one, so when He said "I and the Father are one", He was claiming to be God in flesh.

And as it turns out, when Jesus is tried, these are the two things they bring against him: before the Jewish Sanhedrin they accuse Him of blasphemy, and before Pontius Pilate they accuse Him of trying to be a King of the Jews, a rival to Caesar.

So how would this very ordinary-looking carpenter from Nazareth convince people that He was in fact the Messiah and God in the flesh? The answer is, all the miracles Jesus performed.

Mark 2:1-12 *And again He entered Capernaum after some days, and it was heard that He was in the house. ² Immediately many gathered together, so that there was no longer room to receive them, not even near the door. And He preached the word to them. ³ Then they came to Him, bringing a paralytic who was carried by four men. ⁴ And when they could not come near Him because of the crowd, they uncovered the roof where He was. So when they had broken through, they let down the bed on which the paralytic was lying. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven you." ⁶ And some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, ⁷ "Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸ But immediately, when Jesus perceived in His spirit that they reasoned thus within themselves, He said to them, "Why do you reason about these things in your hearts? ⁹ "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise, take up your bed and walk'? ¹⁰ "But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins" -- He said to the paralytic, ¹¹ "I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." ¹² Immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went out in the presence of them all, so that all were amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"*

Here is a classic example. Jesus makes a claim to do something which only God can do – forgive sins. When the whisperings about blasphemy begin, Jesus challenges them – which is easier to say that, or to make a paralytic walk? Obviously it is easy to say either one. But to show that there was power behind his statement to forgive sins, he shows he has the power to heal a paralytic. All at once, Jesus has verified His claim to be God in the flesh.

Jesus' miracles were always centred around His claims. He was not simply a mobile clinic. He was not merely doing good and uplifting the health and life of the people. No, He was drawing attention to His person and authenticating His claims.

Most of Jesus' miracles occur during this first 2½ years, when He is publicly presenting Himself to Israel as their Messiah. As He presents Himself, He makes two claims about Himself – He is Messiah and He is God. And He backs those claims up with so many miracles that John said we'd run out of paper before we got them all down.

So, what was the result of Jesus' public presentation of Himself to Israel? This leads to the second stage of Christ's life:

II. The Public Popularity of the Son

Mark 3:7-12 *But Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the sea. And a great multitude from Galilee followed Him, and from Judea ⁸ and Jerusalem and Idumea and beyond the Jordan; and those from Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they heard how many things He was doing, came to Him. ⁹ So He told His disciples that a small boat should be kept ready for Him because of the multitude, lest they should crush Him. ¹⁰ For He healed many, so that as many as had afflictions pressed about Him to touch Him. ¹¹ And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, "You are the Son of God." ¹² But He sternly warned them that they should not make Him known.*

That list of place names is really a way of saying, from north to south, east to west. Tyre and Sidon were to the far north, parallel to Syria. Idumea was to the far south, south of Jerusalem. People were coming to Jesus from every part of the country. In the first 2 ½ years, Jesus was wildly popular. In an era before Internet, cellphones or newspapers, picture how news of Jesus spread across the land: from village to village, from town to town, with the stories and accounts of healings, miracles, exorcisms, food created, remarkable teachings. You can picture the almost universal fascination with Jesus across the country. Jesus would have been essentially a kind of folk-hero.

His own apostles took this popularity to mean that people had believed in Him, and that there was no way that He would be killed by the leaders of Israel. In fact, Jesus did use that popularity to His advantage. The leaders of Israel wanted to kill Him from the very beginning, but they could not because they feared a riot if they did so. They had to involve the Romans to get Jesus executed. Jesus was able to use this to His advantage to bring about His own sacrificial death not a day too soon or too late.

So when you read the Gospels, understand that Jesus was very popular among the people almost to the end of His ministry. Right through chapter 8 of Mark, you are seeing the period of popularity. So we would expect that Jesus went from here straight to the throne of David. But we know that didn't happen. So what changed? The third stage of Christ's life could be called:

III. The Public's Parting From the Son

Mark 8:9-12 ⁹ *Now those who had eaten were about four thousand. And He sent them away, ¹⁰ immediately got into the boat with His disciples, and came to the region of Dalmanutha. ¹¹ Then the Pharisees came out and began to dispute with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him. ¹² But He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation."*

Israel loved Jesus. They hated the Romans. They understood that Jesus was claiming to be the messiah, and they had seen His power. They wanted to make Him king and get Him into that position of political deliverer as soon as possible. But the problem was this: they wanted Jesus on their own terms and not on His. They admitted they needed saving from Rome, but they denied that they needed saving from sin.

That sounds like a lot of people today. They love Jesus as long as Jesus fits into their scheme – social upliftment, political revolution, moralism, passive resistance, you name it. But once you press people with Jesus' own claims, the attitude changes. And that's exactly what Jesus would do. He did something fascinating with people. When He got all the superficial praise from the crowds, he pulled off the covers of their hypocrisy and unmasked them by speaking hard words. He would

throw down a hard challenge, a choice which would cost, something which his hearers would have to do if they were serious about Him: take up their cross, forsake all, let the dead bury their dead, eat His flesh and drink His blood.

What Jesus was doing was piercing through the shallow acceptance that people had of Him. He was forcing people to reckon with who He truly was and what it meant to have Him as Messiah. One of the ways He did this was by deliberately entering into conflict with the Pharisees. The Pharisees had produced a false doctrine of works righteousness. Jesus entered into open conflict with them, to show people that to accept Him would be to reject the doctrine of the Pharisees. And to reject the Pharisees would bring awful consequences to your life – you would be cast out of the synagogue – the place where Jewish life was centred.

This is part of the point of the Sermon on the Mount. It's what Jesus does after feeding the 5000. It's what Jesus does after entering Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. He calls on Israel to separate from the false doctrine of the Pharisees and embrace Him, even at great personal cost.

But the response of the nation was ultimately rejection. They liked what Jesus could do. They loved the possibility that Jesus presented – freedom from Rome. But they did not want Jesus as Lord of their lives. They did not want Jesus to save them from their sins and they did not want to embrace any kind of social rejection or personal cost. They wanted the kingdom, but they didn't really want submission to the king. In other words, they wanted to use the king as a means to their own ends.

That's just like religious people today. They like Jesus; they like what He could do. But they do not want to be in a living relationship with Him, where He tells you what to do. They do not want Jesus to save them because they don't think they need saving. They do not want to embrace any gospel which would make others in the community think that they have become religious fanatics.

Just like those Israelites, many people today want heaven, but they don't want worship of Jesus Christ as a prerequisite. They want to use Jesus as a means to their own ends.

So the people rejected Jesus as Messiah and as God. The leaders rejected Jesus from the start, and it only grew, until Jesus could say that they had committed the unpardonable sin. Popular rejection of Jesus was harder to see, because people were still fascinated by Him, He was still a folk-hero to them, even though most had not bowed the knee to Him. Their ultimate rejection of Jesus was seen on Friday morning, when they realised that to accept Him would be to reject the Pharisees, and they rose up in rejection.

So 2 ½ years into Jesus' ministry, we see a change in emphasis, and a change in focus. This is the fourth stage in the life of Christ:

IV. The Private Preparation of the Son

Mark 8:27-31 ²⁷ Now Jesus and His disciples went out to the towns of Caesarea Philippi; and on the road He asked His disciples, saying to them, "Who do men say that I am?" ²⁸ So they answered, "John the Baptist; but some say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰ Then He strictly warned them that they should tell no one about Him. ³¹ And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Here we see the change in Jesus' approach. He begins to tell His disciples that He will be killed.

Once the rejection of Jesus by the leaders of Israel was complete, and knowing the hard and

stubborn hearts of the people, Jesus changed tactics. He no longer sought a public presentation of Himself. Instead, for the last year, He sought to prepare His disciples for His coming death. You see this shift beginning from about Mark 4, and complete by chapter 8.

Jesus began leaving Jewish territory, He was reluctant to do miracles, He told people not to speak of Him openly. This was because He was seeking solitude with His disciples. He wanted to teach them the hard truths of His upcoming death, and the discipleship truths that would go with it.

This was the time when he began to speak in parables. He gave a teaching in public, but he gave the explanation in private, with his disciples.

Having originally published His claims throughout the land, now Jesus sought to escape the fame and notoriety that came with His miracles, as He began the steady journey towards His real purpose in coming - to suffer and die.

This leads us to the fifth stage in the life of Christ:

V. The Passion of the Son

Mark 10:32-34 ³² Now they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them; and they were amazed. And as they followed they were afraid. Then He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would happen to Him: ³³ "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; ³⁴ "and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again."

For we who are so familiar with the death of Christ, it is hard to understand why His disciples did not understand that this was His real reason for coming. But remember, according to the Hebrew Scriptures the Kingdom to be established by the Messiah, is an eternal kingdom (Dan 2:44); it seemed to those who accepted Jesus' claims that there is no room for a dying Messiah in that. In fact, Jesus never spoke explicitly about His death until three years into His three and a half year ministry. And when he did, the disciples were shocked and unwilling to believe it. Not only did they see Jesus as the conquering Messiah, they were also greedy for the chief places in the kingdom, and didn't really want to hear about suffering by Him or by them.

But as we all know, the death and resurrection of Christ is the most important part of the story. Christ's death is the reason He came. Mark 10:45

Mark 10:45 ⁴⁵ "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

The bulk of the book of Mark deals with the last week of Jesus' life. From chapter 10 to the end, we are dealing with one week. But it is the most important week of all, because this is where Jesus died as suffering Messiah on behalf of the world. Here is where He made it possible for Israel to be saved spiritually, so that they could receive Him and eventually receive the kingdom. And of course, the greatest miracle of all, the miracle with the greatest vindicating force was Jesus' own resurrection. This proved beyond all doubt that He was God in the flesh and the Messiah.

So, as we study this book, don't get lost in the details and see just another miracle, or another dispute with the Pharisees. See this structure: Jesus Public Presentation, where He declares Himself God and messiah, and proves it with mighty works. There is initially great popularity, but as Jesus strips away superficial responses, there is rejection, and hardness. So Jesus turns to the private

preparation of His disciples about a year before He dies, telling them six months later that He will die.

The final section is how the servant carefully orchestrated and prepared His own sacrifice for the sins of the world.

And the point of all this? Mark is written so that those who do not know Christ may read of Him as He truly was and is and come to trust in Him. It is written for those who do believe to know Him even more, to grow in worship and love and adoration. It's the greatest story ever told. Let's learn it so that we know not a personal Jesus, but the Jesus of history and of reality.