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Session 9 - Mark: Background and Themes

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All right, let's jump right in. You know, when we think of the Gospels, we usually picture these neat, straightforward biographies of Jesus. But the Gospel of Mark? It's not that at all.

It's this fast-paced, urgent, almost breathless document. It was written with a very specific mission, for a very specific group of people who were in a whole lot of trouble. Think of it less like a history book and more like an emergency dispatch from the front line.

And that brings us to the central mystery of Mark. Get this. It's the shortest Gospel by far, yet it spends nearly half its time on just the final week of Jesus' life.

His arrest, his suffering, his death. So you have to ask, why? Why this intense, almost obsessive focus on the darkest moments? The answer to that question, well, it unlocks the purpose of the entire book. So to solve this puzzle, we're going to walk through five key pieces of evidence in Mark's Gospel.

We'll look at who he was writing for. It's really unique in its structure, how it portrays Jesus, this strange theme of a secret Messiah, and we'll finish with its absolutely shocking original ending. Okay, first up, the audience.

Because you really can't understand Mark's message until you know exactly who he was talking to. Most scholars are pretty sure Mark was writing to a community of Christians living right in the heart of the Roman Empire. In Rome itself.

And let me tell you, that was not an easy place to be a follower of Jesus. They were a tiny minority, they were deeply misunderstood, and they were facing serious hostility, maybe even the horrific persecution under Emperor Nero. To put it simply, they were struggling, and they were scared.

And this is the absolute key. Mark's Gospel has what scholars call a pastoral purpose. He's not just a historian listing facts.

He's more like a coach or a counselor. He's crafting his story specifically to comfort and strengthen his readers. It's like he's looking them in the eye and saying, "Hey, I know you're suffering.

I know this is hard, but look at the path Jesus walked. Your story, it's a part of him. This whole pastoral purpose thing is the reason why Mark structured his gospel in such a unique way.

So let's take a look at that structure now. The whole book is basically split right down the middle, a tale of two halves. The first eight chapters are all about power.

Jesus is this triumphant lion-like figure doing incredible miracles, casting out demons, acting with the authority of God himself. But then right at the halfway point, bam, he slams on the brakes. Everything pivots, and the next eight chapters become this relentless march toward the cross, focusing on Jesus as a suffering servant.

The shift is so sudden and so dramatic that one scholar famously summed it up like this. Just think about that for a second. Half the book is just an extended introduction to the story of suffering and death.

That's not an accident. That is the whole point. Mark is practically shouting at his readers that the divine power they saw in the first half isn't canceled out by the pain in the second half.

No, it's the other way around. Jesus' ultimate triumph, his ultimate power, is actually achieved through his suffering. For a church that felt like it was being crushed, can you imagine a more radical, hopeful message than that? And Mark just keeps hammering this theme home with this very specific portrait of Jesus himself.

You know, Matthew shows Jesus as a great teacher, a new Moses. But Mark, he's obsessed with this tension, this paradox, between Jesus being divine and being human. One minute Jesus is forgiving sins, something only God can do, and the next he's getting tired, frustrated, or feeling completely overwhelmed.

He's vulnerable. A perfect example of this is the title Jesus loves to use for himself: Son of Man. Now, when we hear that, we tend to think, oh, that's his human side, right? Well, actually, that's a huge misunderstanding.

It's a direct callback to the book of Daniel, where it refers to this powerful, divine figure who comes on the clouds and is given an eternal kingdom by God. So Jesus takes this title of cosmic authority, and he connects it to serving and suffering. He completely flips it on its head.

I mean, this one verse is the entire gospel of Mark in a nutshell. The powerful, divine ruler chooses the path of a suffering servant. For those Roman readers, this was a game changer.

Their God wasn't some distant, untouchable emperor. He was powerful, yeah, but he also knew their suffering up close and personal. So all this brings us to a couple of the strangest features in the whole book: something called the messianic secret and Mark's super harsh portrayal of the disciples.

This first one is a real head-scratcher. It happens over and over again in Mark. Jesus performs an incredible miracle.

Someone figures out who he is, and he immediately tells them, "Shh, don't tell anyone. I mean, why would you try to keep the best news in the world a secret? Well, there are two big reasons. First, everyone's idea of a Messiah was completely wrong.

They were expecting a warrior king who would come and destroy the Romans. Jesus was not that guy, and he had to shut down that expectation fast. And second, and this is the

really big one, you couldn't possibly understand who he truly was until after the crucifixion and resurrection.

His identity was wrapped up in being a suffering Messiah. Now for the other really odd thing, Mark is just brutal to the disciples. Compared to the other Gospels, his version of them is relentlessly negative.

They're clueless, they're faithless, they're always saying the wrong thing, they just don't get it from beginning to end. So again, you have to ask yourself, why? Why would Mark make the heroes of the story, Jesus' hand-picked inner circle, look so bad? And the answer takes us right back to his pastoral purpose. He's writing to people who felt like failures, people who were afraid their faith wasn't strong enough.

By showing that the disciples, the ones who literally walked and talked with Jesus, were also flawed and fearful, Mark was sending a hugely comforting message. It's okay to struggle; it's okay to be afraid. If they stumbled, it's okay for you to stumble too.

And this powerful theme of human failure builds to an unbelievable climax in the final verses of the entire Gospel. Now, this might actually blow your mind a little. If you open up a modern Bible and look at the end of Mark, you'll probably see a little footnote.

That's because our oldest and most reliable copies of the Gospel just stop. They end abruptly at verse 8. The tidy ending we all know, where Jesus appears to everyone? That was almost certainly added centuries later by a scribe who probably thought the real ending was just too jarring. So here's how it originally ended.

The women find the empty tomb, and an angel tells them the greatest news in history. Jesus is risen; go tell the disciples. And what do they do? They run away in terror.

And the very last words of the original Gospel of Mark are, for they were afraid. Full stop. That's it.

The end. So here it is, the ultimate question. Why on earth would you end a book called the Gospel, the Good News, on a final note of pure human fear and failure? It seems like the worst ending possible.

But when you remember who Mark was writing for, it's not just a good ending. It's the most perfect, powerful ending imaginable. So let's break down this deliberate, shocking ending.

First, it reflects the reader's reality. Mark ends with fear and failure because his audience was fearful and felt like failures. He meets them right where they are.

Second, it's not just about failure. It's balanced by the incredible promise the angel gives them right before they run away. He is going ahead of you.

There you will see him. And that brings us to the ultimate encouragement of the entire book. The story of Jesus doesn't depend on our bravery, on our perfection.

It rests entirely on His promise. Even when His followers fail and run away scared, He has already gone ahead of them. Our failure doesn't stop His victory.

And for that struggling little church in Rome, what better news could there possibly be?