

40
days in

MARK

— *written and edited by* —

WILLIAM F. COOK III



MARK

Titles in 40 Days Series

40 Days in 1 Samuel

40 Days in Mark

40 Days in Psalms (release March 2021)

40 Days in 1 Corinthians (release March 2021)



MARK

WILLIAM F. COOK III

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Preface

Forty is an important number in the Bible. Moses was on Mount Sinai with the Lord God for forty days (Exod. 34:28), Elijah traveled for forty days before arriving at Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:3–8), and Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days (Mark 1:13). Some self-help experts believe it takes forty days to develop a habit. Whether they're right or wrong, there is no habit more important for a Christian to develop than a consistent devotional life.

In *40 Days in the Word*, readers will discover a humble attempt to assist believers longing for a fresh moving of God's Spirit in their life. This series intends to enable believers to read though books of the Bible in their devotional time discovering God's truth within its biblical context. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to mature believers in their faith and increase their passion and zeal for Jesus Christ.

Many Christians find it difficult to sustain momentum in their devotional life. They desire to read the Bible consistently but lack encouragement, guidance, and direction. Commentaries are often too technical, and devotionals may fail to challenge them to dig deeply into God's Word. The *40 Days* series offers both a deeper discussion of a biblical passage and at the same time encourages the reader to make personal application based upon what the text *actually* says.

We live in a day where casual Christianity (which is not biblical Christianity at all!) has infected the church in the West. People are clamoring for shorter sermons that are more focused on felt-needs rather than on the Bible, and many in the pulpits are obliging. Furthermore, the songs that are often sung fail to extol the greatness of God, but instead make people feel better about themselves and their comfortable lifestyles.

If the church in the West is to recapture the passion of the early church, God's people must spend time on their knees with their Bibles open allowing God's Spirit to convict them of their sin, build them up in their faith, and empower them to take the gospel across the street and around the world. The hope of the authors of this series is that God's Spirit will use these volumes to help God's people develop an ever-increasing love for their Savior, Jesus Christ.

In addition to helping individual believers, the series holds out hope for small groups desiring to focus their meetings on the study of the Bible. A group would spend approximately two months (five days of readings per week) reading through a book of the Bible along with the *40 Days* volume, and then base their discipleship time encouraging each other with what they discovered during the previous week.

The Spirit of God and the Word of God work together to strengthen God's church. The apostle Paul put it this way: "Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts" (Col. 3:16). Paul's hope is my prayer for you as you journey through these next forty days.

Bill Cook
Holy Week, 2020

Day One

Jesus Christ, the Son of God

Mark 1:1–20

The Big Picture

Mark begins his gospel at “break-neck” speed. In the first thirteen verses, he introduces the main character (Jesus Christ, the Son of God), describes John the Baptist’s ministry as the fulfillment of ancient prophecy, and depicts Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River and temptation in the Judean wilderness (Mark 1:1–13). He then moves from a summary of Jesus’ message (“the kingdom of God”) (1:14–15) to a description of the call of his first four disciples (1:16–20).

Digging In

The opening verse serves as both an introduction to the book and a Christological confession (1:1). Mark starts at “the beginning.” For Mark, the beginning of the gospel about Jesus is the ministry of John the Baptist. The word *gospel* means “good news.” The good news is about Jesus Christ and the salvation he secures.

The main character in Mark's gospel is Jesus Christ. The name *Jesus* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Joshua*, which means "Yahweh saves." The Greek term "Christ" is the equivalent of the Hebrew "Messiah." Both words mean "anointed one."¹ "Son of God" is an important Christological title for Jesus as well. The title is used about Jesus by demons (3:11; 5:7); by God at Jesus' baptism (1:11) and transfiguration (9:7); and by a Roman centurion at the climactic moment when Jesus dies (15:39). Another reference to Jesus' Sonship is in the high priest's question: "Are you the Son of the Blessed One?" (14:61). Strangely enough, the title "Son of God" is never used by the disciples in this gospel.

John the Baptist's ministry was foretold in the Old Testament (1:2–3). The phrase "as it is written" is a standard expression indicating the authoritative nature of the Old Testament. The reference to Isaiah refers specifically to the second part of the quotation in verse 3; while verse 2 is a reference to Malachi 3:1. Mark refers only to Isaiah because he was the more prominent of the two prophets. John did not appear "out of the blue," but he was clearly a part of God's redemptive plan.

Mark applies Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 to both John the Baptist and Jesus. The Baptist is both "my messenger" and "a voice." The phrase "prepare your way" in verse 2 is paralleled by "prepare the way" in verse 3. John prepared the way for the coming Messiah by his preaching. The imagery in Isaiah is the return of God's people from exile. Mark takes a passage in Isaiah that refers to the coming of Israel's God and applies it to Jesus.

John's ministry took place in the Judean wilderness. People flocked to him in this barren wasteland (1:4–8). John's baptism was the most characteristic aspect of his ministry. His baptism symbolized repentance from sin. Repentance refers to a change in one's thinking that results in a change of lifestyle. John's preaching created quite a stir as people journeyed to the wilderness to hear him and be baptized by him. His appearance and lifestyle were reminiscent of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8; Mal. 4:5–6). John's clothing was common to nomadic desert dwellers. His food ("locusts and wild honey") was not unusual for people living in the desert. The locust was akin to a large grasshopper.

At the heart of his message was a person, the coming Messiah. John recognized his inferior role to the coming one. He acknowledged that the Messiah was mightier than he and that he was “not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals.” Untying someone’s sandals was the task of a common slave. John’s baptism was with water, but the coming one would baptize “with the Holy Spirit.”²

Jesus’ baptism marks the inauguration of his messianic ministry (1:9–11). God’s voice at his baptism confirms Mark’s earlier statement about Jesus being the Son of God. Jesus came to the Judean wilderness from Nazareth, which was a small town in Galilee located about half-way between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. As Jesus came up out of the water, “he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.” Mark emphasizes the immediacy of the events. This is the first of Mark’s forty-one uses of “as soon as.” The term heightens dramatic tension and movement in the narrative.

As Jesus came up out of the water, “he saw the heavens being torn open.” The imagery is of God in heaven tearing open the sky below as he prepares to act. The same word is used at Jesus’ crucifixion in reference to the temple veil being torn (15:38). At the beginning of the gospel, at Jesus’ baptism, God tears the heavens open, and at the end of the gospel, when Jesus dies, God tears the temple veil from top to bottom. Jesus’ messianic ministry begins and ends with these heavenly acts. At his baptism, he identifies with sinners, and at the cross, he dies for them.

Jesus saw the Spirit descending upon him. The probable background is God’s work at creation. Genesis 1:2 says: “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.” If this imagery is correct, then the thought is that Jesus’ ministry is the beginning of a “new creation.” Furthermore, his ministry will be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus alone appears to hear God’s voice. The first part of the pronouncement reflects Psalm 2:7, which is a coronation psalm used at the installation of Israel’s kings. Therefore, Jesus is identified as God’s Son and Israel’s true king. The second part of the quotation is a reference to Isaiah 42:1, which is a part of the first of Isaiah’s Servant Songs, identifying Jesus as the true Servant of the Lord. At the inception of

Jesus' messianic ministry, God declares him to be his beloved Son and Israel's Servant-King.

One should not miss the Trinitarian nature of Jesus' baptism. God the Father speaks words of affirmation and love; the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus to empower his messianic ministry; and Jesus, the divine Son, is baptized in the Jordan. Jesus' baptism at the beginning of his public ministry points toward its culmination in his death, burial, and resurrection.

Jesus goes directly from his baptism into conflict with Satan (1:12–13). Mark's description of Jesus' temptation is extremely brief when compared to Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13. The brevity of the description makes it more striking. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not describe any of Jesus' temptations. Mark describes the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness. The point is that Jesus was not caught off guard by the encounter, but it was a part of God's plan for him.

The "forty days" are reminiscent of the forty years Israel wandered in the wilderness (Num. 14:34). Mark highlights the fact that where Israel failed as God's son, Jesus was obedient and victorious. Mark alone makes reference to the "wild animals." The thought adds a greater sense of danger to the scene.

Jesus' ministry begins officially after John the Baptist's imprisonment (1:14–15). Mark's comment, "the time is fulfilled," is reminiscent of Paul's statement in Galatians 4:4: "When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law." Jesus proclaimed "the gospel of God," that is the good news from God and about God. At the heart of Jesus' gospel preaching is "the kingdom of God."³ The kingdom of God refers to God's rule or reign rather than to a geographical realm, more a power than a location. The kingdom was inaugurated with the coming of Jesus and will be fully manifested and consummated at his return. The requirements for entrance into the kingdom are repentance from sin and faith in the gospel.

Jesus' method of kingdom expansion is discipleship. The setting of verses 16–18 is the Sea of Galilee, a body of water that is approximately 8 miles wide and 13 miles long at the farthest points. Jesus approaches four fishermen, calls them to follow him, and says he will make them "fish for men." They immediately leave their profession to follow Jesus.

Living It Out

As significant as John the Baptist is, this passage is about Jesus Christ. Mark's understanding of Jesus' identity is stunning: Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, God's Son. His forerunner was prophesied in Israel's sacred scriptures. He identified himself with those he came to save at his baptism and was pronounced by a voice from heaven to be God's beloved Son. His ministry would be empowered by the Spirit, yet the rending of the heavens at the beginning of his ministry and the tearing of the temple veil at the end is often overlooked. These two events bracket Mark's gospel. At the beginning, God acknowledges Jesus as his Son, the very one who will cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me" (15:34). Truly, this Jesus is to be loved, worshiped, and followed.

Day Two

The Kingdom Inaugurated

Mark 1:21–45

The Big Picture

Today's reading details the beginning of what is known as Jesus' early Galilean ministry. Capernaum, situated on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, is both the launching point and the base of operation for Jesus' Galilean ministry (Matt. 4:13). In just a few brief paragraphs, Mark describes Jesus' ministry moving from obscurity to tremendous popularity. The section is punctuated by references to the growing crowds (Mark 1:28, 33, 37, 45). By the end of the chapter Jesus has to spend time in unpopulated areas due to the size of the crowds. Furthermore, the passage demonstrates how Jesus will advance the kingdom through preaching, healings, and exorcisms.

Digging In

After calling the four fishermen to be his disciples, Mark describes Jesus teaching in the Capernaum synagogue (1:21–28). Those in

attendance are stunned at the authoritative nature of his teaching compared to the teaching of the scribes. Unexpectedly, an unclean spirit (demon) in a man recognizes Jesus as “the Holy One of God.” While the disciples and crowd do not know Jesus’ true identity, the unclean spirit certainly does.

The demon fears that Jesus has come to destroy them. This is the first of four major exorcism stories in this gospel (5:1–20; 7:24–30; 9:14–29). Jesus silences the demon and commands that it come out of the man. The exorcism was somewhat violent as the demon causes the man to go into a convulsion, and it screams as it comes out of him. The crowd is amazed at both Jesus’ authoritative teaching as well as his authority over the demon. The news about Jesus begins to spread widely throughout Galilee (1:28). Jesus’ presence is an assault against Satan’s dominion. As the kingdom of God advances, the prince of this world will fight back but the outcome is already a settled issue.

Jesus departs the synagogue and goes to the home of Simon and Andrew accompanied also by James and John (1:29–31). Jesus heals Simon Peter’s mother-in-law of a fever. She immediately gets up and begins to serve them. After the sun sets and the Sabbath regulations concerning work end, the entire town gathers at the door. He heals many who are sick and casts out many demons (1:32–34). Jesus would not allow the demons to speak because they knew his true identity. Jesus silenced the demons so they would not identify him publicly and thereby keep messianic speculation as muted as possible. Many Jewish people looked for a militaristic messiah who would throw off the yoke of Roman domination.

The next morning, Jesus rose very early and went to an isolated place to pray (1:35). Mark does not describe Jesus praying often in his gospel, but when he does, it is at crucial moments (6:46; 14:32–39). Mark clearly indicates that prayer was an important part of Jesus’ life. Each reference comes at a time when Jesus made important decisions about his ministry. Here he must decide if he will remain in Capernaum and let the crowds come to him or if he will take the gospel outside Capernaum. The point is that crucial decisions in life should be saturated in prayer. When Simon does finally find him, he exclaims,

“Everyone’s looking for you!” Jesus’ agenda, however, will not be determined by the disciples, or the crowds, but by the Father.

Jesus and his four disciples leave Capernaum and make a tour throughout Galilee preaching and “driving out demons.” The only event that Mark describes during this initial tour of Galilee is the healing of a man with a serious skin disease (1:40–45). In Mark’s mind, this event must have been very important, since it is the only one he records out of all the sermons Jesus preached, the people he healed, and the demons he cast out on this tour of Galilee.

The man had a serious skin disease called leprosy. The Old Testament gave specific instructions in Leviticus 13 and 14 on how those with leprosy were to be treated. The man believed Jesus was capable of healing him, but he was uncertain if Jesus was willing. Jesus was “moved with compassion” and reached and touched the man and healed him. Interestingly enough, Jesus did not have to touch the man to heal him, but his touch demonstrated his compassion toward him. The man had probably not felt a human touch in a long time.

Several things may be in play here. First, it was believed that only God could heal leprosy and, that is exactly what Jesus does. Second, Mark specifically mentions that Jesus touched the man out of compassion. One would be considered unclean if a person came into physical contact with someone with leprosy. Rather than Jesus becoming unclean, the unclean person is cleansed of his disease. Third, Jesus demonstrated that he was not opposed to the Law of Moses by instructing the man to present himself to the priest (who would pronounce him cured) and make an offering for his healing (cf. Lev. 13:47–14:54).

Living It Out

Two thoughts stand out for reflection in today’s reading. First, ivory tower theologians are people who make theological pronouncements without any real-world ministry experience. They write and speak from a place of isolation. They deal in the theoretical. The same can be said of many Christians that isolate themselves from the hurts and troubles of people. One thing is clear in these stories; Jesus did not isolate himself from those he came to save.

Second, Jesus' need to pray is sometimes hard to understand since he is God. We should never forget, however, that he is also man. We learn from Jesus that he did not think he could do life effectively without prayer. In this passage, a major decision needed to be made—set up shop in Capernaum or leave a growing ministry to preach elsewhere. Immediately after finishing his time of prayer, he leaves Capernaum for a time. “Numerical success” didn't determine Jesus' decision but rather the Father's guidance in prayer. If praying for guidance was important for Jesus, how much more should it be for us!

Deepen your understanding of Scripture.

The Holy Spirit uses God's Word to grow believers in their faith and increase their passion for Jesus. As each volume focuses on a particular book in the Bible, believers will find the study useful for the enrichment of daily devotional reading or as the basis for small group Bible study discussion.

In this volume, readers will be led through a daily study of the Gospel of Mark. *40 Days in Mark* breaks down the book of Mark into chunks that present the "Big Picture" of the passage, then "Digging Deeper" into that section, and then moving to help the reader into "Living Out" the lessons that are taught in each section.

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