

THE
VICTORY
ACCORDING
TO MARK

AN EXPOSITION OF
THE SECOND GOSPEL

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While my debts to many for the content of this book are mentioned in the epilogue, I would like to dedicate this book first to my wife, Jennifer, and to my children, who all sacrificed a great deal of time for me to get this done and offered encouragement. Without them there would be no book.

I would also like to include in this dedication Jim and Janey Irwin and all the saints who met in our weekly Bible study at their house in Renton, Washington, where I first began to develop this material.

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PREFACE

The Double Cycles 2.0: Author's Introduction to the Republication of *The Victory According to Mark*

This book was originally published in 2003. The word got out that I was leading Bible studies on Mark's Gospel, and Canon asked me if I wanted to write a commentary. In the overconfidence of my youth, I agreed. Based on responses from others, I am glad I did.

At the time there were several influences affecting my understanding of Mark's Gospel.

The first of these influences were the works of my personal intellectual triumvirate—James B. Jordan, Peter J. Leithart, and Jeffrey J. Meyers. For thinking about Mark's Gospel or any other section of Scripture, it is difficult for me to escape their influence and even more difficult to imagine why I would want to do so. (Of course, that doesn't mean that I don't make mistakes, and those mistakes should not reflect on them.) In the case of Jeff Meyers, this influence became more focused because I had the privilege of hearing his sermon series on Mark's Gospel.

The second influence was N. T. Wright, especially the work he did in his first two “big books,” *The New Testament & the People of God* and *Jesus & the Victory of God*. The title of my commentary is, obviously, an invocation of the second of those works.

The third influence was Austin Farrer through his book *A Study in St. Mark*. I had heard of Farrer when I read David Chilton’s commentary on Revelation, *The Days of Vengeance*, which cited his *A Rebirth of Images*. While I didn’t follow Farrer in everything, and probably don’t agree with his view of Scripture, it was an amazing read and I leaned on it heavily.

That reliance on Farrer, while a blessing in general, led to what I now see as two mistakes. I recognized the first of these mistakes early and the second recently (sort of), when I learned that my book was going to be republished. While there are probably many improvements that could be made on *The Victory According to Mark*, I am aware of these two and think they should be addressed.

The first involves the literary pattern of Mark 1–10. One of the most notable features in *A Study in St. Mark* was Farrer’s argument that the gospel was structured in a series of double cycles that are marked by calling and healing stories until Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. Then there are two more double cycles that don’t involve healing miracles in Mark 11–16. I based my book chapters on this structure, but made an alteration because I didn’t agree with Farrer at one point.

A few months after the publication of *The Victory According to Mark* I still disagreed with Farrer, but I realized my “fix” was not helpful either.

Now that Canon is reprinting my commentary, it seems like an ideal time to revisit the issue here. Ideally, I would revise the

chapters. The problem is that I find it difficult to insert myself into the writing of my younger self. Instead, I am going to briefly spell out my current view here in a new introduction. You can read it now or you can skip it and come back later when you have read some or all of the commentary.

What Completes a Resurrection?

I use the term “double cycles” but they don’t seem completely twofold until Jesus enters Jerusalem. In Mark 11–16, the two double cycles follow an A-B-A-B pattern. I’ll write more about that below. But in Mark 1–10, after an introduction (1:1–15), the first ten chapters are patterned by a major cycle followed by a minor cycle:

A → a

B → b?

C → c

D → d

I will explain the question mark below.

There are thirteen healing stories in Mark’s Gospel and all precede the entry into Jerusalem. Jesus’ own resurrection is the final healing story, bringing the total to fourteen, and completing a second seven. These stories are about single individuals and thus are easily distinguished from general statements that Jesus healed lots of people.

Let’s look at the last five healings: Jesus casts out a demon (7:24–30); Jesus heals a deaf mute (7:31–37); Jesus heals a blind man (8:22–26); Jesus casts out a demon that makes the victim deaf and mute (9:12–29); Jesus heals a blind man (10:46–52).



CHAPTER 1 — MARK 1:1–15

The Call

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou Me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

—Albert Schweitzer

Mark’s beginning is characteristically succinct. “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The danger here is that we are so accustomed to speaking of and reading about a “gospel,” or even “the gospel” and also “the Son of God,” that we don’t bother to think about what these terms meant in their original context.

What Is the Gospel? (1:1)

Let's take the term "gospel" first: What does it *mean*? We kick the word around a lot in evangelical circles. It is derived from the Old English word *godspell* and is used to translate the Greek term, *evangelion*. The best translation of the term is "good news" or "joyful message." However, we might have a better understanding if we consider some prominent ways in which the word was used at the time of Jesus.

The Pagan Context

Consider this inscription from 9 B.C.:

The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a deliverer for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere . . . ; the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the *glad tidings* that have come to men through him.¹

Here we have the announcement of the birthday of Augustus Caesar dubbed as a gospel—"glad tidings" or *good news*. As

1. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 43. A slightly different reading of the same inscription is found in John Dominic Crossan's *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 1.



Calling & Restoration

Mark's Gospel has begun with a flurry of activity: introduction, prophecy, John's ministry, John's prophecy, Jesus' baptism, Jesus' testing, Jesus' ministry. Now things start to slow down slightly. Mark begins to give us larger literary units devoted to the events he wishes to relate to us.

A New Vocation (1:16–20)

In 1 Kings 19:19–21, we read that Elijah the prophet found Elisha while he was plowing with a pair of oxen. Elijah threw his cloak upon him. In response, Elisha got permission from Elijah to first kiss his father and mother good-bye and then slaughtered the oxen and cooked them by burning the harness and other implements. Having given a feast to those around, he then left to serve Elijah.

We have stated that Jesus was a new Elisha as the successor of John the Baptist, the new Elijah. But we must not forget that Elisha was recognized as being a new Elijah himself,

having inherited his spiritual power and ministry (2 Kgs. 2:15). It should not surprise us if we see Jesus, as a new Elisha, acting as a greater Elijah as well. And here we see Him, like Elijah before Him, calling His successors from their (former) vocations as fishermen and telling them to follow him. Jesus' call has more urgency. Mark gives us no sign of Simon, Andrew, James, and John even speaking to their parents, let alone hosting a feast (the feasting must wait until after they have begun following Jesus).

In Jesus' call of His first four disciples, we see Him acting as one who is filled with the Spirit and thus is fulfilling the role of the Spirit. In verse 10 we saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus as He came up from the banks of the Jordan. That same Spirit then drove him into the wilderness to be trained. The Spirit, in a word, called Jesus. Now, Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, is the one who calls the disciples. They too are called from the shallows of the sea.

Of course, the fact that fishermen are called from their occupation and from water might strike us as simply a coincidence. If Jesus wants to call fishermen in the midst of their work, it would be hard not to call them in the context of water. Yet, when Jesus calls Levi from his money table to leave his vocation and follow him, we find Mark making sure to let us know that this too happened by the seashore (2:13–14). And then when Jesus selects the Twelve, even though they are on a mountain, Mark makes sure we know that this mountain is by the sea and that Jesus took the twelve up from the sea to ordain them to their new office (3:7, 13). There are many details which, in our curiosity, we could wish Mark had included in his account, but



CHAPTER 3 — MARK 2:14–3:12

Calling, Conflict & Restoration

Jesus began his ministry trying to avoid conflict by silencing demons and exhorting those whom He cleansed to not spread stories but rather to submit to the administration of Moses. Now that conflict has broken out into the open with the healing of the paralytic, we might expect more conflicts to ensue.

We will not be disappointed.

Called—and Healed—for the Feast (2:14–17)

When Jesus called the first four disciples, He entered their house and performed a healing so that they could be served as guests there (Mk. 1:16–20, 29–31). The story of the synagogue exorcism comes in between (1:21–28), but Mark makes a point of reciting the four names again to put us in mind of their calling.

Here the two stages are given to us without any interruption. Jesus calls Levi to leave his job (Mk. 2:14) and then eats with him (v. 15). This meal is not made possible by raising up a hostess from a bed as Jesus had done before, but when the Pharisees

challenge Him, His reply uses an analogy to healing which reveals the significance of His healings: "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (v. 17).

Without doubt, the "sick" are sinners and the "physician" is the one with the authority to forgive sins. Jesus is referring to the claim He has made just before: If He can heal the paralytic, then He must be able to forgive sins. Jesus is able to eat with sinners because He is able to forgive them their sins. And so it is to this day. We eat and drink bread and wine with Jesus at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for no other reason than that he continues to forgive our sins.

Jesus' Dinner Etiquette

Since we are about to discuss two more conflicts over the way Jesus and His disciples eat, it may be good to point out here how crucial eating and drinking were to the work of Jesus. Jesus' message was in great measure an invitation to a party. It was virtually a dinner club roaming around ancient Palestine. Indeed, when we come to Jesus' last Passover as recorded by Mark and wish to understand what Jesus was doing when He established the Lord's Supper, we must not rip it out of the context of His general dinner etiquette.

Let us take the word of Christ's enemies at face value. Jesus came eating and drinking, and they called him a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax gatherers and sinners (Lk. 7:34). Yet they knew that Jesus Himself had not gorged himself nor gone on a bender. He enjoyed His food and His wine, but He



The First Resurrection

The Pharisees have definitively rejected Jesus, as is proven by their conspiring with loyalists of their enemy Herod in order to kill him. Yet He seems to draw almost everyone else to Himself. Does this mean that Jesus will become an acknowledged king like David once did? Mark's last paragraph gave us hope that most of the people of Israel would recognize Him.

In this next section, we get our first strong hint that Jesus' quarrel is not only with the Pharisees but with others as well. Not only is Judas' pending betrayal mentioned early on—the first mention of Jesus' death in Mark's gospel—but the section then details the unbelief of Jesus' own family. The incident, so near the beginning of this section, of the family disbelieving makes a nice bookend for the last paragraph of the section, which records Jesus being rejected by His hometown. The Pharisees are not the only Israelites with hardened hearts.

Calling the Twelve (3:13–19)

David became a captain to the men he gathered to himself. Jesus too is a captain of a great host and decides to train and equip men under Him. The militaristic nature of Jesus' commission is underscored by the fact that preaching is accompanied by the driving out of the demons—demons who will later be compared to strong men who must be bound and to legions of warriors.

More than an army, Jesus acts in such a way as to indicate that His followers are to be a new Israel. Like He did as the Angel of the Lord with Moses on Mount Sinai with the twelve tribes, Jesus now goes up a mountain and selects twelve men to represent a new version of the twelve tribes.

Before this point in his story, Mark has told us about the callings of five men: Simon, Andrew, James, and John from their boats and Levi from his money table. It is interesting to see how those names are listed with the new ones.

In the first place, Simon, James, and John are not only listed first, but also given new names. Andrew who was called with Peter is now separated from him. David had three special men (2 Sam. 23:8–17), and so does Jesus. The difference, however, is that David's three friends risked their lives for their king and offered him a cup to drink at the risk of their own blood. This time it is the greater David who will make the offer to His three men.

Calling & Healing

Another surprise is that Levi's name has been changed to Matthew. Indeed, if it weren't for the witness of Matthew's gospel, we wouldn't even know that they were the same person. What we



CHAPTER 5 — MARK 6:7–9:1

Calling & Eucharist

Jesus has already established that He calls (and restores) sinners in order to dine with them around the table. Before the raising of Jairus' daughter, Mark emphasized healing and forgiveness. Now we will find Mark especially showing that Jesus is the ultimate King and banquet master. He is not only able and willing to feed the world, both Israel and the nations, but He is in the process of inviting all to His new feast.

Sending the Twelve (6:7–13)

Jesus, once again, calls His disciples. This time, Mark does not explicitly mention the sea being nearby. He has reserved such associations for His initial calling of men to be His disciples. Nevertheless, the sending of the Twelve on a mission reminds the reader of the whole point of calling the Twelve on that mountain by the sea.

And He went up to the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And

He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons. And He appointed the twelve. (Mk. 3:13–16)

And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs; and He was giving them authority over the unclean spirits. . . . And they went out and preached that men should repent. And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them. (Mk. 6:7, 12–13)

What we see here is a movement from promise to fulfillment. The purpose for which Jesus chose the Twelve is now being realized.

In trying to understand Jesus' ministry in its context, we also find here an important factor that must be considered: No matter how much His disciples misunderstood Jesus, they must have understood His basic message well enough to proclaim it on His behalf as His representatives. Any interpretation of Jesus' message that turns it into something completely foreign to the thinking of Jesus' contemporaries needs to be regarded with suspicion. Such a criterion would help us not fall for simplistic slogans such as, "Jesus preached a spiritual kingdom [i.e., a non-material Kingdom], not a political or physical kingdom like the Jews were expecting." It is true that Jesus did not see the geopolitical markers of the kingdom as having permanent standing. But He nevertheless was reorganizing a people as a new Israel throughout His ministry. A body of people marked out by new ceremonies



Calling & Cross

Jesus has now told the disciples about the future, His future as Christ. From here to Jerusalem, we will see Jesus trying to get His message across, but the disciples resisting it or simply misunderstanding it.

Mountain Top to Foot (9:2–29)

When Jesus called the Twelve (Mk. 3:13ff), the first three are especially singled out by new names. Andrew, though technically called before James and John, is no longer listed with his brother. Peter, James, and John are called again up a new mountain for a special revelation. Indeed, though Simon's name change was announced at the calling of the Twelve, Mark applies it only now. From the time of his confession of Jesus as the Christ, Mark consistently refers to the disciple as Peter, the only exception being to quote Jesus' addressing him as Simon when he is asleep in the garden of Gethsemane. Simon's name has now changed to Peter.



CHAPTER 7 — MARK 11:1–14:11

Calling & Confrontation

When King Solomon assumed the throne, David devised two signs by which he would claim his kingdom:

Take with you the servants of your lord, and have my son Solomon ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon. And let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him there as king over Israel, and blow the trumpet and say, “Long live King Solomon!” Then you shall come up after him, and he shall come and sit on my throne and be king in my place; for I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and Judah. (1 Kgs. 1:33–35)

Jesus has just been hailed as the Son of David by Bartimaeus, so it is only proper that He would, like Solomon, be marked out as king by the two signs established by David. First He enters the

city on a donkey; secondly, He is anointed in the environs of the city (Mk. 11:1–11; 14:3–9).¹

We have seen in the last few chapters how Mark seems to be structuring his Gospel according to calling and restoration. The miraculous restorations are over now; there is nothing left except the ultimate restoration, the resurrection of Jesus. However, I don't think that means that Mark's Gospel has no more cycles left to its pattern. It is impossible to not notice the similarity between two stories—the sending of the two for a donkey and the sending of the two for a place to eat the Passover (Mk. 11:1–6; 14:13–15). Here we have Jesus sending two men to fulfill a task in both cases. Furthermore, not only are these passages similar to each other, but they are also similar to the two signs of kingship. In this case, the signs come not from Solomon's assumption of the throne, but from Samuel's prophetic signs intended to convince Saul that he was God's chosen king:

Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. And if anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" you say, "The Lord has need of it"; and immediately he will send it back here. (Mk. 11:2–3)

When you go from me today, then you will find two men close to Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at

1. I owe this and what follows to Austin Farrer, 130, 131.

The only time Mark referred to Simon as Peter before this point is the exception that proves the rule. Then Jesus selected him and James and John to witness the only resurrection recorded in Mark, other than Jesus' own (Mk. 5:37). That revelation of the power of the new creation typified this one on the Mountain—in both cases only shown to the three.

Spirit Baptism

Beyond its echoes of the calling of the Twelve and the raising of Jairus' daughter, the story of the Transfiguration reminds us of Jesus' baptism. Mark has told us the Spirit is a dove. Here he does not mention the identity of the cloud that enveloped Jesus and the three, but he does not need to. God said through Haggai that the cloud within the Tabernacle was His Spirit (Hag. 2:5). The Spirit came upon Jesus in a humble way at His baptism. Now Jesus is given the fullness of the promise of His baptism, though only temporarily. The presence of Moses, Peter's mention of Tabernacles, the presence of Elijah who was taken up in a fiery chariot while the Spirit fell upon his successor in great power all remind us of the Spirit.

The Transfiguration was a temporary preview of the nature of the resurrection:

But someone will say, "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of