

## CHAPTER 1

# What Is a Disciple?

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THE UNITED STATES recently observed a grim anniversary. Forty years earlier, on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated by a sniper's bullet in Memphis, Tennessee. Many newspaper and magazine articles and television specials recalled the events of that terrible day, and in almost every instance those who had been Dr. King's closest followers were interviewed about their memories. Usually they were called "disciples" of Dr. King. Most of them had gone on to further the cause of civil rights, but their accomplishments were achieved because of their relationship with and the inspiration of their leader.

Such a modern example of discipleship could be repeated over and over. I think most of us get the general idea of what it means to be a disciple. A disciple is one who is devoted to learning the ways and following the example of a teacher or master. But what about being a disciple of Jesus? That is why we are doing this study. The best place to begin our answer to that question is to read the gospel written to do just that—the gospel according to Mark.

 **Read Your Bible: Mark 1:1–20**

(For this chapter I am including the actual text of the reading. But for the other chapters, I expect you to stop reading this book and read the suggested portion from your own Bible. If you are with others, it will be even more profitable if someone reads aloud and the rest follow along. Then talk together about what you have read. Don't get too caught up in detail—this is your introduction to Jesus, and you can come back again and again to get a fuller picture.)

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”—  
“a voice of one calling in the desert,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.'”

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out

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of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Now let’s think about what you just read. Even if this passage of the Bible is familiar to you, try to consider it through the eyes of our fictional friend Titus, who had no background in the teaching of the Bible. If his introduction to being a disciple was Mark, it meant that he had to jump right in and think about Jesus before anything else could be considered. The very first verse of Mark is: “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The word *gospel* denotes an announcement of good news. Mark calls this the *beginning* of the gospel, so we know there will be much more to learn. But before we go any further, we need to know that the good news proclaimed in the Bible is about Jesus, who is Christ and who is the Son of God.

 **Time Out:**

You need to know that *Christ* is not Jesus' last name. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*. *Messiah* means "an anointed one," that is, someone who had oil poured on his head making him a king. Jesus of Nazareth (his hometown) is identified as the One promised for centuries to deliver the Jewish people. So Mark identifies him as Jesus, who is *Messiah* and also the *Son of God*.

In the next few verses of Mark we are introduced to John, also called John the Baptist, who prepares the people for the coming of Messiah (another John also appears in this chapter, the fisherman who became Jesus' disciple). When John baptized Jesus, the Spirit from heaven came on him and a voice spoke from heaven, calling Jesus his beloved Son. So we are at the beginning of the gospel, and already we are learning about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit—the Holy Trinity! We are also introduced to Satan, the evil one who tempts Jesus in the desert.

Obviously, we have much more to learn, but before we can think much about what has already happened, Mark immediately confronts us with the *call* of Jesus. Refer again to the portion you are reading—Jesus came into Galilee (a region in the north of Israel) "proclaiming the good news of God," which is another way of saying that he preached the gospel. Here is what he preached: "The time has come. . . . The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Jesus constantly spoke and taught about the kingdom ("the kingdom

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of God,” “the kingdom of heaven”), but notice how people were to react to this announcement of the kingdom. The word *repent* conveys the idea of turning around and is another way of speaking about converting. The turning speaks of turning to the path of following Jesus, who calls people to “believe the good news!”

The example given of converting comes in the next verses as Jesus calls four men to follow him. Simon (who also has the name *Peter*), Andrew, James, and John were all fishermen. Jesus called them to follow him, and the text says that “at once” or “without delay” they left their old life behind to follow Jesus. Is that the whole story? Probably not. Wouldn’t there have been a time for these early followers to get to know Jesus? That could very well have been the case. But in terms of how Mark presents discipleship at the beginning of his gospel, a disciple is one who hears the call of Jesus and follows him. Mark gives no other details.

Consider one other example of Jesus’ call to discipleship. Chapter 2 of Mark includes the account of Jesus’ call to Levi, a tax collector. (Collecting taxes in the ancient world of Jesus was not a job; it was a racket in which Jews got very rich by ripping off their fellow Jews under the protection of Rome. Not surprisingly, these tax collectors were mistrusted and hated.)



### **Read Your Bible: Mark 2:13–17**

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and “sinners” were eating with him and his disciples,

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for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the “sinners” and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners?’”

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

This account is perhaps more startling than the call of the four fishermen. Jesus called out to Levi, “Follow me,” and immediately Levi left his tax collector’s booth to follow him. Had this man ever met Jesus? Was he already a believer? We are not told these things. All we are told is that Levi heard the call of Jesus and followed. It was a turning point in his life; Mark tells of a dinner to celebrate this new life to which all of Levi’s friends were invited. (Did you notice that Jesus’ companions are already called *disciples*? Check out the second paragraph of the passage.) Take another look at what Jesus had to say when people were surprised that he was associating with tax collectors and sinners: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come *to call* the righteous, but sinners.” Here is another reference to the “call” of Jesus.

## WHAT IS A DISCIPLE OF JESUS?

If we put together the lessons learned in these early chapters of Mark’s telling of the gospel, I believe we can state that a disciple of Jesus is one who has *heard the call of Jesus* and has responded by *repenting, believing the gospel, and following Jesus*. Consider briefly each of those aspects of becoming a disciple of Jesus.

### *Hearing the Call of Jesus*

As you wrestle with what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, the first thing to consider is that behind our thoughts and actions there is a mysterious working of God. It is a “God thing,” as some of my friends would say. An authentic disciple is not just inspired by Jesus; he or she is *transformed* by Jesus. Those first disciples encountered the supernatural power of Jesus in their souls even as they heard the words of Jesus’ call in their ears. No wonder they were compelled to leave whatever they were doing to follow! I do not think Mark would expect everyone who hears the call of Jesus to have the same experience, but I do think he is intending to teach that the end result is the same. However long it takes to get there, one who hears the call of Jesus will repent, believe the gospel, and follow Jesus because the call of Jesus includes the power to answer the call.

“Can I hear the call of Jesus today?” That is an obvious question to ask because we are no longer in a setting where Jesus is walking on the earth physically looking people in the eye and saying, “Follow me.” Nevertheless, it is still the case that Jesus is calling men and women, young and old, to be his disciples—to repent, believe the gospel, and follow him. Later in our study we will see that the apostle Paul again and again refers to followers of Jesus as “the called.” He was writing to people like you and me who had never personally encountered Jesus in his physical being, and yet they had experienced the call to discipleship on just as compelling a level as did those first disciples. People hear the call externally when those words of Jesus, or other portions of the Bible, are read and taught. But they also hear the call inwardly through a supernatural moving of God on their hearts and minds. We will study this idea of calling in chapter 5.

*Stop and think about your experience of the call to discipleship.* This may all be very new to you, as it was to Titus. On the other hand, many of you reading this have grown up with at least some knowledge of Jesus and his teaching. But along with the teaching there must be a personal and inward sense that this is for *me*. I am the one called to repent, believe, and follow. One of the most important purposes of this study is to give you the opportunity to discover whether your interest in Jesus is because of that inward and supernatural call. It is entirely possible to follow Jesus for various human-centered reasons, but such a false calling will not last, and many former “disciples” go on to try other things. But a true disciple called by Jesus will stay on that course, will “walk the walk” with all its challenges, because the call of Jesus includes the transforming power of Jesus.

### ***Repentance***

The first aspect of the call of Jesus, as recorded by Mark, is to “repent” (Mark 1:15). This aspect repeats the challenge of John the Baptist, who came “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4). To *repent* means essentially “to turn,” particularly with the connotation of turning away from sin to another path. It has to do with leaving behind the old in order to follow Jesus. When I’m teaching this idea, I like to picture a room with two walls opposite each other. On one wall is the word *sin*, representing all my selfish thoughts and deeds, only a fraction of which I can really see. The opposite wall represents Jesus and the forgiveness of sin and new life found in him. I have to face one wall or the other—the life of being a disciple is never presented as *adding* Jesus to the life I am already living, but *turning* to Jesus to walk a new path.



Jesus and the other gospel preachers of the early church express the call to repentance in different ways, but they consistently challenge us to face the fact that we are sinners who need redemption—a rescue from our condition. Recall Jesus' words after the call of Levi: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (2:17). The question of sin is not a popular one to consider, but we will find ourselves returning to it again and again as the call of Jesus penetrates our souls.

### ***Believe the Gospel***

The next aspect of Jesus' call is to believe the "good news" (Mark 1:15), which is the meaning of the word *gospel*. In the setting of Mark, that gospel is the good news that God has finally come to fulfill his promise to bring salvation to the world. The term for this coming is *the kingdom of God*, which is the major theme of Jesus' teaching. Jesus announced that "the kingdom of God is *near*" (1:15), because he had come. Jesus, the Messiah, was God's coming to bring salvation to the world. Therefore, believing the gospel is another way of saying, "I believe in Jesus, who is Christ/Messiah, the Son of God."

Stop and think about how this call to believe in Jesus is the natural complement to the call to repent. The process of turning *from* our sin is at the same time the process of turning *to* Jesus. This is a true conversion—faith *and* repentance.

The call of Jesus to believe the gospel is to believe *in* him. As you read through the gospel according to Mark, you will see the new disciples grow in their faith as they learn more of Jesus. Often they will be discouraged and their faith will waver—no more so than when Jesus was crucified. But Jesus was raised from the dead, and their faith was strengthened once more.

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This is a picture of the progress that you, too, will make as a disciple. The important lesson as you begin to consider the call of Jesus to believe in him is that ultimately our faith is significant because it is faith *in Jesus*, who is the Son of God, the King of the kingdom of God. We will struggle and doubt, but Jesus, the one we trust, does not.

### **Time Out**

Don't be confused by the words *believe* and *faith*. They are the same idea: when we *believe* (a verb), we have *faith* (a noun). Both words refer to putting our trust in what we know to be true by actually taking steps to show that trust. There is an important difference between believing something to be true and believing *in* someone or something. A simple example is saying that we believe a chair will hold us up as we look at it, versus showing that we believe the chair will hold us up by sitting in it. The action of actually sitting in the chair is an expression of faith.

### ***Come, Follow Me***

The third aspect of Jesus' call to consider as you begin a study of discipleship is the call to follow him (Mark 1:17). How much of the life ahead of them did those first disciples understand? Probably very little. But when Jesus called, they followed. Mark tells the gospel story in a way that makes it quite clear that believing in Jesus means following Jesus as his disciple.

Consider one other portion of Jesus' teaching in Mark as you think about the call to follow. About halfway through Mark's

gospel, the focus changes, and Jesus begins to move toward the time of his crucifixion.



**Read Your Bible: Mark 8:27–34**

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Christ.”

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

“Take up [your] cross and follow me.” The passage begins with an affirmation that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. That was a remarkable confession for a Jewish person to make, but Peter (remember, *Peter* is another name for *Simon*) was very clear in what he said. This is where Mark began his gospel, as we have seen, and Peter as well as the other disciples have now embraced this affirmation personally. Notice that after Peter’s

confession Jesus “*began* to teach” something new. He called himself the “Son of Man,” a title for Messiah, and explained that he must suffer many things, culminating in his death. Then he added something that was totally confusing to the disciples until after it happened—he said that three days after his death, he would rise again.

Clearly, the idea of Jesus’ dying was not to Peter’s liking, and he argued with Jesus and even rebuked him. But then Jesus spoke of what that meant for his disciples: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and *follow me*” (Mark 8:34). The call that we saw in chapter 1, to follow him, is repeated, but Jesus has now added that a disciple must be prepared to follow him even in his death (which is the meaning of the cross). This is not something that any of us want to hear, but the gospel message is very clear: following Jesus will not be easy; there will be sacrifices to be made, possibly even loss of our lives for him. Jesus explains this idea further in the next portion of the teaching (8:35–38), which you will read later. There are many more lessons about what it means to follow Jesus, but the reality of his cross and our death with him dominates the challenge of being a disciple.

### ***I Will Make You Fishers of Men***

This has been a long answer to a basic question: “What is a disciple of Jesus?” But one other truth must be considered from those first verses in Mark. Jesus came to this earth with a mission. He was sent to fulfill the mission given to him by his Father in heaven: to bring the kingdom of God. Therefore, an important part of the call to discipleship is a call to join him on that mission. He said to those first disciples, “Follow

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me, . . . and I will make you fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). When we remember that he was speaking to fishermen, we can appreciate that he was calling them to be devoted to working with people instead of fish. We are called to follow Jesus—to repent and believe in him—but in following Jesus, we now join him in the great work he came to do. We will return to discuss this mission more fully in the last chapter of this study, but it is important to see that Mark includes this idea at the very beginning of his gospel.

### Summary of Chapter 1

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce you to Jesus and his call to discipleship—to follow him. We did this by thinking about how Mark begins the gospel.

Who is Jesus?

- He is Christ, the Messiah, also called Son of Man.
- He is the Son of God.
- He was baptized with water and then with the Spirit from heaven.
- He came to do battle with Satan and his demons.
- He preached the gospel—the good news that the kingdom of God was near.

What is a disciple of Jesus?

- One who has heard the call of Jesus and has responded by:
  - Repenting.
  - Believing the gospel.
  - Following Jesus.

## Assignments

- 1. Read Mark.** The first assignment for this study of discipleship is to begin your reading of the Bible. If possible, set aside time to read the entire gospel of Mark in one sitting or in just a few days. Try to read it through quickly to take in the whole story.
- 2. Read Mark 1–3.** Then start again and focus on chapters 1–3 and Jesus' first weeks with the disciples. Plan to have read the entire gospel a second time by the time you complete chapter 3 of *The Walk*. As you read, remind yourself: *That's me. I'm the one watching him heal a leper or cast out demons. I see him praying and teaching and proclaiming the forgiveness of sin.* And ask yourself: *What am I to make of all this? And what does it mean to follow such a Master?*
- 3. Begin your journal.** Get a simple notebook or use your computer, and start to write your thoughts and questions that come to you as you read. These can be private thoughts or good things to talk about when you meet with your mentor or group.