

The theme of suffering in the gospel of mark



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Christians today often face times in their lives where they may experience a major crisis, the sudden death of a loved one or news of a terminal illness. While human nature dictates human efforts toward desperately finding relief, reason and understanding in times of agony and confusion, the Gospel of Mark shows us through the person of Jesus Christ that suffering is a part of the Christian's life journey. If the whole world suffers and groans, the Christian does so even more. Ultimately, Christians know that Salvation in Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit do not keep the Christian from suffering; rather Salvation and the Holy Spirit sustain them through the suffering. For this reason, the Gospel of Mark is truly a gospel for those who are suffering and need to find consolation.

Mark's gospel is clearly a gospel of the suffering Messiah and of suffering discipleship, concepts that Christians can perhaps relate to. In fact, the theme of Jesus suffering is illustrated not only in the New Testament but so too in the Old Testament particularly in Isaiah 53 and in a Psalm of David, Psalm 22 where the suffering of the future Messiah is foretold: " He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.

.. But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (Isaiah 53: 3-6). The Psalm of David although written by David and presumably about

himself alludes to the future Messiah not only in his speech but also in the suffering David depicts in his writing. David seems to prophecy the suffering that Jesus endured for the redemption of the world's sins: My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?..

. O my God, I cry by day, but Thou dost not answer; and by night, but I have no rest... But I am a worm, and not a man, a reproach of men, and despised by the people.

All who see me scoff at me... Upon Thee I was cast from birth; Thou hast been my God from my mother's womb. Be not far from me, for trouble is near.

.. all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax... and my tongue cleaves to my jaws; and Thou dost lay me in the dust of death.

For dogs have surrounded me; a band of evildoers has compassed me; they pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones... they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22: 2-19). Furthermore, on the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus predicts his suffering and murder two more times (Mark 9: 30-32; 10: 32-34).

Then he says that his followers will be hated and persecuted and put to death (13: 9-13). The climax is Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. The Gospel of Mark illustrates plainly the reality of this mystery of suffering through the portrayal of the life of Jesus. Mark's gospel is an active story that uses direct language in illustrating the life of Jesus with force and emotion. This seems to be a characteristic of Mark's style in revealing his message. There is

neither an infancy narrative nor genealogy as there are in Matthew and Luke.

In fact, the Gospel of Mark goes straight to the point by beginning with Jesus' ministry. The story seems to move more quickly than the other gospels. Jesus moves about rapidly from place to place unlike in the books of Matthew and John. There is little wasted motion and rarely any redundancy.

It is also noticeable that there is a repeated theme of the suffering disciple by which it can be concluded there was active persecution at the time. It appears Mark wants to encourage believers first of all by placing Jesus' identity firmly in mind and then showing his path of suffering and death. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate that the Gospel of Mark is truly a reflection of the mystery of suffering because of several reasons. It will be explained first through the emphasis on suffering; second, the question of who Jesus really is and finally, the concept of discipleship.

In addition, the concept of conflict, community and the humanness of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark will provide additional material in illustrating the theme of suffering. The first aspect of the emphasis on suffering is spread throughout the gospel. Mark's Jesus is a suffering Messiah who moves relentlessly, and rapidly to the cross and through his journey to the cross he encounters hurt and suffering not only at the hands of the Pharisees and Romans but also from his disciples who hurt Him in their current actions and further with Jesus' knowledge of their future actions. In Mark 22: 47-48, one of the twelve apostles, Judas Iscariot betrays Jesus.

Jesus responds to this betrayal, “ Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss? ” This must have been agonizing for Jesus, knowing that one of the twelve apostles whom he loves and trusts, has betrayed him to the fullest, handing Him over to those who will crucify and kill him. Moreover, Jesus predicts and tells Peter of how Peter shall betray Jesus by denying Him three times. Peter says, “ Lord with you I am ready to go both to prison and to death! and Jesus answers, “ I say to you Peter, the cock will not crow today until you have denied three time that you know me” (22: 33-34). Again, this is a part of the suffering that Jesus must endure, the betrayal of those that he holds dearest and closest to Him. The largest part of his suffering however is the time near his death.

After Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus changes his preaching. A new urgency comes into his style and he starts to talk about his coming death. Peter tried to rebuke him, but Jesus said “ away from me Satan” (8: 33). He saw death coming and did not want to have to go through it.

From then on Jesus had this anticipation until the night that he was betrayed. Jesus went to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. He was in agony as he prayed and asked his father that if there was any other way to take away his imminent death may it be so but in the end it would be the Lord’s will that it would be done (14: 35-36). His own disciple then betrayed him. The remaining apostles abandoned him, and he was left alone. Jesus was then blindfolded and struck by the people in the court and beaten by soldiers (14: 53-65).

The next day he appeared before Pilate, after his hearing he was again taken to be beaten, mocked, and ridiculed by the soldiers. They hit his head with a staff and put a crown of thorns on his head. He was put on the cross and died in agony (15: 1-37). This is the end of Jesus' suffering on earth. The concept of suffering in Jesus' life can only be seen as connected with his ministry: his life, his death, his resurrection; they all relate to one another.

The second aspect of the gospel in terms of the theme of suffering involves questions about Christ's identity, about who Jesus really is. The central and guiding question of Mark's gospel is, " Who do you say that I am? " (8: 29). The major concerns of this Gospel are understanding the mystery of Jesus' identity and responding to it with faith. Who is Jesus? Mark proclaims that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah. This proclamation is demonstrated throughout the New Testament, but Mark implicitly states it by means of the healings, the parables, the instructions, the encounters with demons, and above all the death and resurrection.

For Mark, the most important means of revealing Jesus' identity seems to be his suffering on the way to the cross. It becomes the standard in faith in Jesus. All the titles and images given to Jesus take on a true meaning when seen in the context of Jesus' suffering and redemptive death. A third reason for examining the gospel of Mark in terms of suffering is Mark's concept of discipleship. As stated previously, Mark emphasizes Jesus' desire to go the way of the cross and in this manner so too must Jesus' disciples be closely bound with the cross. The disciples do not understand suffering.

In the end, they flee because they cannot come to terms with that suffering. They cannot see that suffering is a part of discipleship from which emerges a pathway of suffering. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is moving directly, quickly, steadfastly, to Calvary with his disciples suffering along with Him. The apostles did not understand that through their commitment to Christ they had to accept a life of hardship. Through Mark's Gospel one can often find the disciples complaining of these hardships because they did not fully comprehend what it was to be a disciple of Christ. Jesus reprimands them many times.

After the storm at sea Jesus says, " Why are you so terrified? Why are you lacking in faith? "(4: 40). After he walked on the water, the gospel tells us that they had not understood about the bread which he had miraculously multiplied (8: 16-20). Their minds were closed to the meaning of the events, and Jesus says, " Do you still not understand? "(8: 21). Again, after the cure of the possessed boy, the gospel tells us that they failed to understand his words (9: 16-29). In the end, in Gethsemane, they all deserted him and fled.

Moreover, Mark's point seems to be that Jesus' followers cannot possibly expect a fate different from that of their crucified Lord and Jesus plainly makes it clear that this must be if they are to follow him, " And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, ' If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me'" (8: 34). The real point is what it means to follow Jesus. Discipleship is costly (8: 34-37; 12: 44; 14: 3-5), and persecution comes with the territory (10: 30). " You yourselves must watch out. You will be arrested and taken to

court. You will be beaten in the synagogues; you will stand before rulers and kings for my sake to bring them the Good News.

But before the end comes, the gospel must be preached to all peoples. And when you are arrested and taken to court, do not worry ahead of time about what you are going to say; when the time comes, say whatever is then given to you... Everyone will hate you because of me" 13: 9-13).

Mark's own community is experiencing suffering, and Mark wants them to know that suffering is a part of discipleship. Christians, too, need to know that suffering is a part of discipleship. They need to realize that, just as the cross was the way for Jesus, the cross must be the way for the disciple. The confirmation of suffering as part of life is a source of strength for Christians.

Mark seems to see the disciples not simply as historical figures from the past but as representative of Christians of his own time. The instructions Jesus gives his followers, the difficulty they have in understanding him, and Jesus' bonds with them despite their failures, are all meant as challenges and consolation to the Christian who reads the gospel. Another significant focus in Mark's gospel is conflict. There is conflict with the demons, conflict with the scribes and Pharisees, conflict with both the Roman and Jewish leaders, and even conflict with the disciples.

Mark 2: 1-12, the story of the paralytic who was let down from the roof, is the first of five stories that depict conflict with the Jewish authorities. These conflict stories show the mounting hostility towards Jesus on the part of the scribes and the Pharisees. In Mark 1: 23-26, 3: 7-12, 5: 1-20 and 9: 14-19, Jesus is in conflict with the demons. They recognize that their hour of

destruction has arrived. Most of the conflicts, but not all, are resolved but each is resolved in a different manner. Jesus resolves the conflict with the demons through his healing power; the conflict with the authorities comes to an end when Jesus is put to death, which moreover fulfills God's redemptive plan.

The problem with the disciples continues to the end of the gospel; whether or not it is ever resolved remains an open question, since the gospel concludes without explaining the effects of the Resurrection on the disciples. However, Chapter 16: 9-20, with its post-resurrection appearances and Jesus' ascension seems to change in Mark's style as those verses depict the disciples in a much better light for they are more optimistic in their attitude towards Jesus. Conflict is often a significant factor in suffering: conflict with family, conflict with society, conflict with emotions and feelings. It is safe to say there is hardly a form of suffering that does not involve conflict.

Although, just as in Mark's gospel, some of these conflicts may be resolved, many conflicts Christians go through can and will remain unresolved as well. As stated earlier, the disloyalty of the disciples contributed to the suffering that Jesus had to endure. There is a reason for all these references to unfaithful disciples (disciples who do not understand, disciples who not behave like one who is devoted to Christ). This is a reason for looking at the concept of community in Mark's gospel as a further basis for the theme of suffering. Mark's Gospel seems to be addressing a community that knew suffering and knew it well.

Mark is writing for a suffering community. He needed to tell this community that Jesus suffered just as his followers were now being asked to suffer, that Jesus had told his disciples that suffering was a part of following him, and that Jesus had promised rewards to those who faithfully endured suffering. Mark is a gospel written to strengthen and encourage Christians facing martyrdom. Some Christians, many Christians, were faithful and underwent heroic martyrdom for the new faith, but it is very likely that others betrayed the community and ran away in fear.

Just as in Gethsemane the disciples deserted Jesus and fled, so some of these early Christians, too, might have deserted and fled. Mark's community was predominantly a Gentile community, with a portion of the population being Jewish Christians. The Jewish segment is suffering the pain of having to abandon beloved and sacred customs and practices, and the Gentile portion is still feeling the pain of being "outsiders." Jesus' contact with children (9: 35-42), with people from Gentile areas (3: 7-12; 5: 1-20), and his healing of the (gentile) Syrophenician woman's daughter (7: 24-30) all show that Mark considers community to include both those inside and outside. Many suffering persons tend to be looked upon as outsiders.

Even though in this day and age there is not the formal taboos of the Biblical times, indeed there are persons who suffer; persons with AIDS/terminal illnesses, persons with disabilities, families of suicide victims, prisoners, and many others who are all considered to be outsiders. Community, as it is portrayed by Mark, seeks to include not some but all those who suffer. A final means in which Mark deals with the theme of suffering is Mark's portrayal of

a very human Jesus. Mark shows a man with human feelings and strong emotions.

In the face of suffering he feels compassion, “ Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘ I am willing; be cleansed’” (1: 41); He shows anger and frustration, “ But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, ‘ Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them!’” (10: 14), “ After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, ‘ Stretch out your hand. And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored” (3: 5). Jesus could also be amazed at the turn of events, “ And He wondered at their unbelief. And He was going around the villages teaching” (6: 6).

This depiction of Jesus as a very human person can give support to persons who suffer, persons who experience deep emotions and feelings, persons who need to express anger, frustration and sadness. The human feelings that Jesus felt and his ability to overcome them can be a comfort to those in agony. Mark’s illustration of Jesus is inviting to such persons and lets them know that feelings and emotions are good, and that Jesus’ compassion toward them is their refuge. Mark’s gospel was written for a particular community in the first century, a community facing persecution and death, a community facing a crisis of faith, but it is just as much a gospel for today. Today’s society tends to diminish the value of suffering. It is a society that is almost addicted to “ feeling good” with instant gratification as the prevailing ideology.

Thus, it is necessary for today's society to see that suffering is a part of Christian discipleship, needs to see the appropriate function of conflict, needs to realize the value of a community which includes both those outside and inside, and needs to appreciate the appeal of Jesus' humanness and most importantly, his suffering. Mark's gospel is particularly appropriate for Christians today because no matter the amount of suffering, Christians can find solace in the belief that the end of suffering will bring about Salvation. Jesus' statement in Mark, chapter 13, verse 13 seems to say it all, " But the one who perseveres to the end will be saved. "