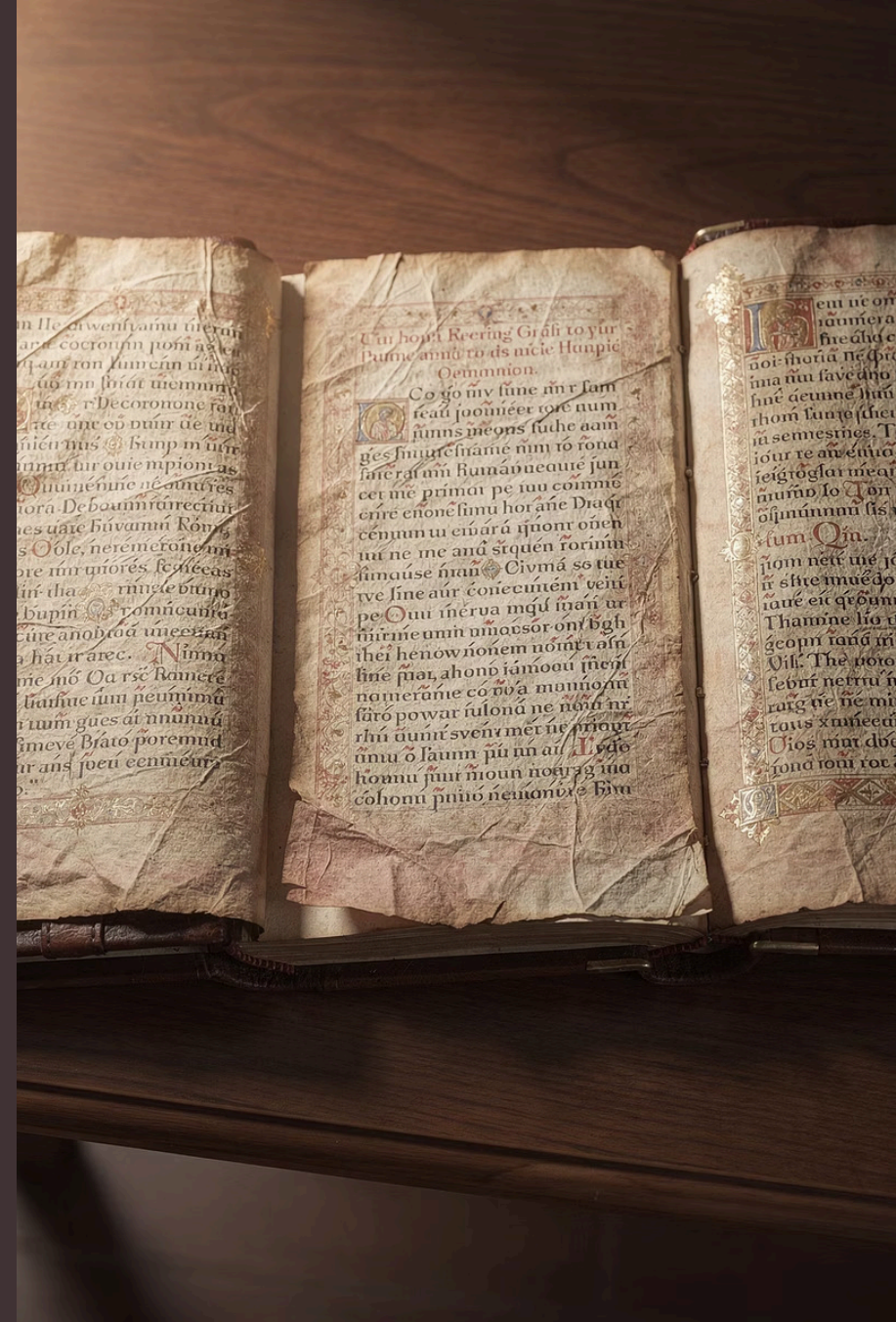


# The Gospel of Mark

## Good News, Costly Discipleship, and the Politics of Jesus

Mark's Gospel stands as the fastest, sharpest, most urgent account of Jesus's ministry. Written for communities living under pressure, it offers not private comfort but public truth. This is good news that confronts, challenges, and costs something real. Mark calls us to reimagine power, redefine faithfulness, and recognize that God's kingdom arrives not through domination but through service and sacrifice.



# The World Behind Mark

## Historical and Cultural Context

Mark's Gospel emerged in a world shaped by Roman occupation and imperial violence. First-century Palestine lived under the constant weight of empire: soldiers in the streets, taxes draining resources, and crucifixion serving as Rome's brutal reminder of who held power. The empire maintained what it called "peace" through systematic violence and surveillance.

Daily life for ordinary people meant navigating fear, managing poverty, and surviving under systems designed to extract wealth and crush resistance. Religious leaders often collaborated with Rome to maintain their own positions. Into this world of pressure and pain, Mark proclaims a gospel that challenges every assumption about power, security, and what it means to be faithful.

Understanding this context is essential. Mark wasn't written in a vacuum; it emerged from communities asking how to follow Jesus when faithfulness could cost everything. The Gospel speaks directly to people who know what it means to live under oppressive systems and wonder where God is in their struggle.



📅 70 CE

# When Mark Was Written

## A Gospel Born in Crisis

### Written Around 70 CE

Most scholars date Mark's composition to approximately 70 CE, a pivotal moment in Jewish and early Christian history.

### Temple Destruction

The Jerusalem Temple, the center of Jewish religious life, was destroyed by Rome during the Jewish War.

### Communities in Crisis

Early believers faced persecution, displacement, and the loss of foundational religious structures.

Mark's Gospel emerged at a moment of profound loss and instability. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem shattered assumptions about how God's presence worked in the world. Communities that had tied their identity to that sacred space now faced a devastating question: *How do we follow Jesus now?*

Mark's urgent, fast-paced narrative speaks directly to people living through trauma and uncertainty. It doesn't offer easy answers or cheap comfort. Instead, it shows a Jesus who embraced suffering, redefined messiahship, and promised God's presence even when everything familiar has been stripped away. This is a Gospel for people who need more than platitudes; they need a word that can sustain them through real crisis.

# Who Wrote Mark

## Authorship and Tradition

### Anonymous Gospel

The Gospel itself makes no claim about its author. Like all four Gospels, it was originally anonymous.

### Early Church Tradition

Second-century church fathers connected the Gospel to John Mark, a companion of Peter and Paul.

### Oral Preaching

The Gospel shows signs of being shaped by oral storytelling, vivid memory, and community preaching.

### Focus on Urgency

What matters most isn't the writer's name but the Gospel's powerful, immediate message.



While church tradition associates this Gospel with Mark, a figure connected to Peter's teaching ministry, the text itself remains anonymous. What we can say with confidence is that Mark was written by someone deeply immersed in the Jesus story, someone who understood both Jewish Scripture and the pressures facing early Christian communities.

# Why Mark Was Written

## Purpose of the Gospel



### Strengthen Fearful Communities

To give courage to believers facing persecution, loss, and uncertainty about their future.



### Redefine Messiah

To show that Jesus's messiahship looks like suffering service, not political conquest or violent revolution.



### Validate Suffering

To proclaim that suffering is not a sign of God's absence or failure but part of faithful discipleship.



### Announce God's Reign

To declare that God's kingdom has arrived and confronts every competing claim to power.

Mark wrote to communities asking hard questions: Why does following Jesus lead to suffering? Where is God when empire seems to win? How do we stay faithful when everything feels like it's falling apart? The Gospel responds by showing that Jesus himself walked this path, that suffering doesn't mean abandonment, and that God's kingdom arrives precisely through faithfulness under pressure, not through grasping for worldly power.

# The Kingdom of God Is Near

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (*Mark 1:15, NRSVUE*)

Mark's Gospel opens with explosive urgency. God's reign, God's kingdom, has arrived. This isn't a promise about heaven later; it's an announcement about God's way breaking into the world *now*. The kingdom of God is public, disruptive, and present.

In a world dominated by Roman power, this proclamation was revolutionary. Mark uses language that competed directly with imperial claims. Caesar announced "good news" about military victories; Jesus announces good news about God's liberating reign. The kingdom of God confronts every other claim to ultimate authority, whether that's Rome, religious systems, or any structure that crushes people under its weight.



## Already Present

The kingdom isn't waiting for some future moment. It's here, working now.



## Public Truth

This is about how communities live, how power operates, how justice works.



## Disruptive Power

God's kingdom doesn't fit quietly into existing systems. It transforms them.

# Messiah Redefined

## Power Through Service, Not Domination

At the heart of Mark's Gospel sits a stunning reversal. In Mark 8, Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah, God's anointed one. It's the pivotal moment of recognition. But immediately, Jesus begins teaching about suffering, rejection, and death. Peter rebukes him. This can't be what Messiah means. Messiahs conquer enemies; they don't submit to crosses.

Jesus responds sharply: "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter's vision of messiahship, shaped by expectations of political power and military victory, must be completely reworked. Mark shows us a Messiah who redefines power itself. Victory comes through faithfulness, not domination. Greatness looks like service, not control. The path to life runs through death.

### Expected Messiah

- Military conqueror
- Political liberator
- Restores Israel's glory
- Defeats Rome

### Jesus's Messiah

- Suffering servant
- Spiritual transformer
- Builds alternative community
- Exposes empire's violence

### Result

- Disciples confused
- Crowds disappointed
- Leaders threatened
- God's way revealed

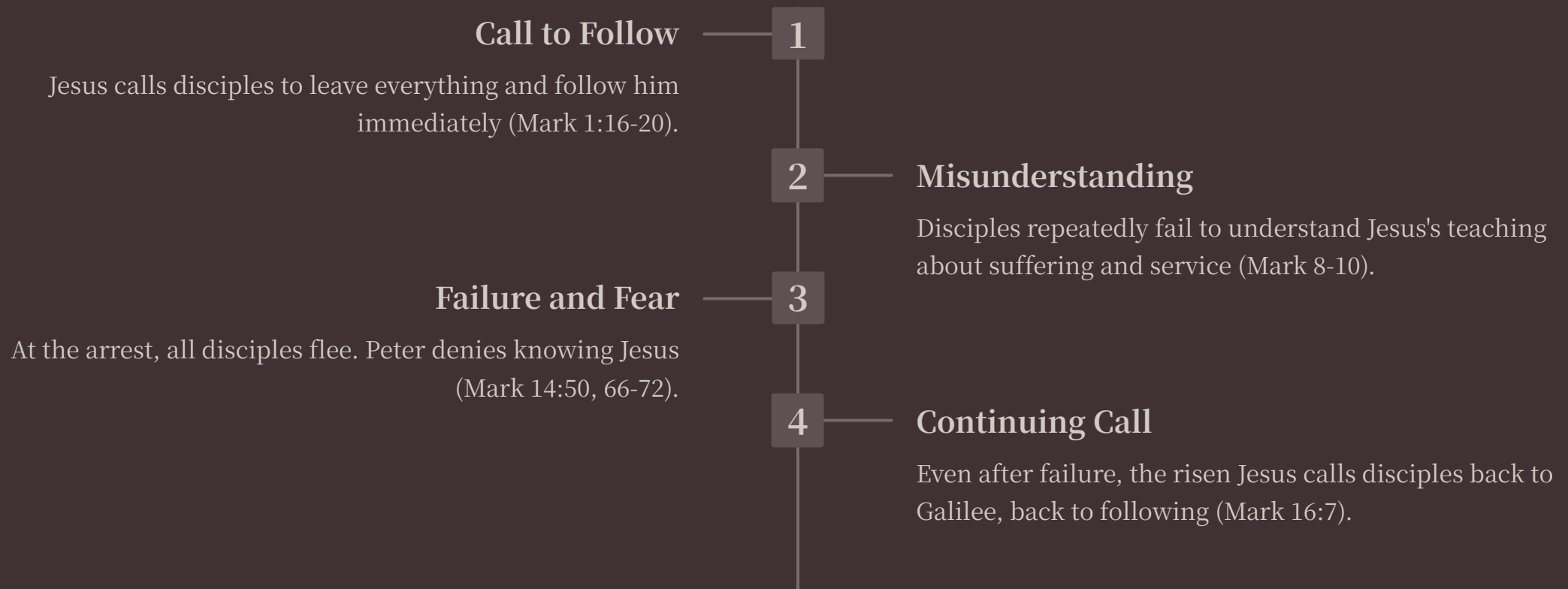
# Costly Discipleship

## Following Jesus Means Something Real

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (*Mark 8:34, NRSVUE*)

Mark offers no romanticized vision of following Jesus. Discipleship costs something. The language of "taking up your cross" wasn't metaphorical in the first century; it was the Roman method of execution for rebels and troublemakers. To follow Jesus meant risking everything, including life itself.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, the disciples misunderstand, hesitate, and fail. They argue about greatness. They fall asleep in Gethsemane. Peter denies Jesus three times. Mark doesn't hide their failures because discipleship *is* stumbling forward, staying in the story even when you're afraid, choosing faithfulness over safety.



The good news is that discipleship isn't about perfection. It's about staying in the story, returning when you've fled, and learning that faithfulness matters more than success.

# Where God Is in Mark

## God in Motion

Mark's Gospel shows us a God who moves. At Jesus's baptism, the Spirit descends like a dove and drives Jesus into the wilderness. God speaks at the baptism and again at the transfiguration, claiming Jesus as beloved Son. Throughout the Gospel, God acts through Jesus to restore bodies, dignity, and community.

God heals lepers, casts out demons, feeds thousands, calms storms, and raises the dead. God touches what religion calls unclean and makes it whole. God centers children, honors women, welcomes outsiders, and confronts religious and political systems that crush people under their weight.

Most radically, Mark shows us God present at the cross. When Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34, NRSVUE), he's quoting Psalm 22, a prayer that moves from abandonment to trust. Even in that moment of apparent absence, God is present in solidarity with all who suffer under empire's violence.



### Baptism

Spirit descends, God claims Jesus as beloved.



### Healing Ministry

God restores bodies and communities.



### Transfiguration

God's glory revealed, voice speaks again.



### Crucifixion

God present even in suffering and death.

# Mark's Structure

## How the Gospel Is Organized

01

### New Beginning (1:1-13)

John the Baptist, Jesus's baptism, temptation in the wilderness. The story opens with explosive urgency.

02

### Ministry and Conflict (1:14-8:26)

Jesus teaches, heals, confronts religious authorities, and gathers disciples. Tension builds as people ask, "Who is this?"

03

### Turning Point and Discipleship (8:27-10:52)

Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah. Jesus redefines messiahship through suffering. Teaching intensifies on what it means to follow.

04

### Confrontation in Jerusalem (11-13)

Jesus enters Jerusalem, cleanses the Temple, debates religious leaders, and predicts the Temple's destruction.

05

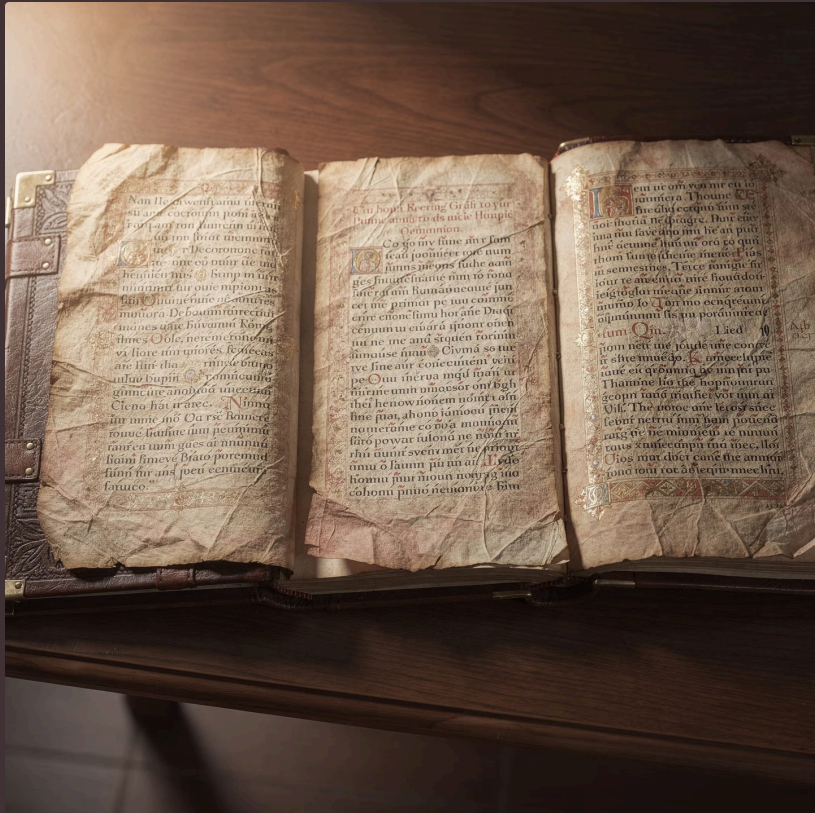
### Cross and Empty Tomb (14-16)

Betrayal, trial, crucifixion, burial, and the announcement of resurrection. The story ends abruptly with fear and wonder.

Mark's structure moves with relentless energy toward Jerusalem and the cross. Every section builds tension, deepens understanding, and challenges assumptions about power, faithfulness, and what it means to be God's people.

# Mark and the Synoptics

## One Gospel Among Three



Mark, Matthew, and Luke are called the "Synoptic Gospels" because they share similar structure, stories, and even wording. Most scholars believe Mark was written first, sometime around 70 CE. Matthew and Luke, written perhaps 10-20 years later, used Mark as a framework and expanded it with additional teachings, birth narratives, and resurrection appearances.

Mark is the shortest, sharpest, and most urgent of the three. It lacks the lengthy teaching sections found in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount or Luke's parables. Mark races from scene to scene with breathless intensity, using the word "immediately" over 40 times.



### Mark

Written first, around 70 CE. Shortest and most urgent. Focuses on action, conflict, and suffering discipleship. Ends abruptly at the empty tomb.



### Matthew

Uses Mark plus additional sources. Adds birth narrative, extensive teaching sections, and fuller resurrection appearances. Emphasizes Jesus as teacher and fulfillment of Jewish Scripture.



### Luke

Also uses Mark plus other sources. Adds birth narratives, unique parables, and resurrection appearances. Emphasizes Jesus's care for the poor and marginalized.

Understanding Mark's place among the Synoptics helps us see its distinctive voice: raw, urgent, unpolished, and unafraid to show the hard edges of following Jesus.

# Why Mark Is Political

## Gospel vs Empire

To modern readers, calling Mark's Gospel "political" might feel uncomfortable. We've been taught that faith is private and personal, something separate from politics and power. But Mark's first audience would have heard political claims on every page.

### Imperial Language Challenged

- **"Gospel"**: Romans used this word for announcements about Caesar's military victories or a new emperor's ascension.
- **"Son of God"**: This was an imperial title claimed by Caesar Augustus and his successors.
- **"Kingdom"**: In a world dominated by Rome's kingdom, announcing another kingdom was revolutionary.
- **"Lord"**: Caesar was called lord and savior; Mark applies these titles to Jesus.

### Political Realities

- **Crucifixion**: Rome reserved this execution method for political rebels and slaves.
- **Temple Critique**: Jesus's action in the Temple challenged both religious and political authority.
- **Tribute Question**: Mark 12:13-17 directly engages the politics of Roman taxation.
- **Barabbas**: Pilate offers to release a known insurrectionist, highlighting Jesus's perceived threat.

Mark's Gospel proclaims that God's kingdom rivals Rome's order. It announces that true power looks like service, that the vulnerable matter more than the powerful, and that violence will not have the final word. This is deeply, unavoidably political.

# Jesus and Power

## An Alternative Politics

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

*(Mark 10:43-44, NRSVUE)*

Mark's Jesus doesn't just critique empire; he models an alternative politics. When disciples argue about who is greatest, Jesus places a child in their midst and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Mark 9:37, NRSVUE). In a world that valued status and power, centering children was revolutionary.

### Leadership Redefined

True greatness comes through service, not domination. Leaders serve the community; they don't exploit it for personal gain.

### Vulnerable Centered

Jesus consistently honors those society dismisses: women, children, lepers, tax collectors, the demon-possessed, the poor.

### Religious Systems Critiqued

Jesus challenges religious leaders who place burdens on people, ignore justice, and collaborate with oppressive systems.

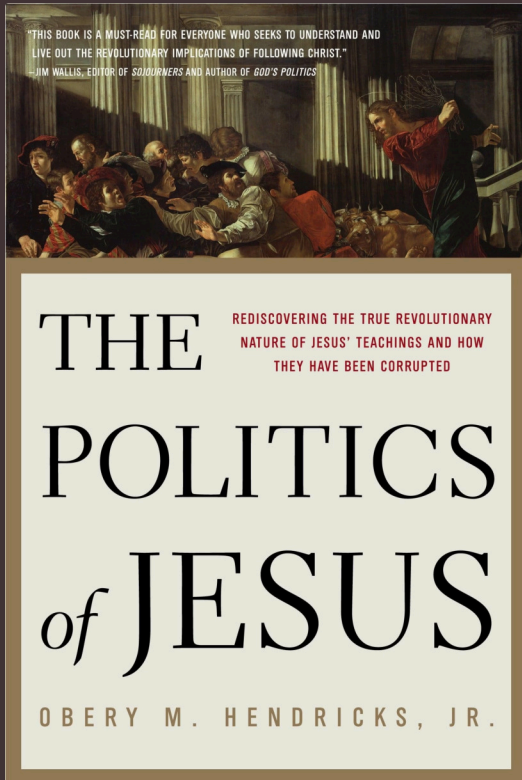
### Violence Rejected

When Peter draws a sword in Gethsemane, Jesus rebukes him. The kingdom comes through faithfulness, not force.

This alternative politics doesn't withdraw from the world; it confronts how power operates and offers a different way. Mark shows us a Jesus who builds community across boundaries, challenges systems that crush people, and demonstrates that God's way looks radically different from empire's way.

# Obery Hendricks and Mark

## The Politics of Jesus



Biblical scholar Rev. Dr. Obery Hendricks Jr. (AME represent) has powerfully articulated how Jesus's ministry was fundamentally political. In *The Politics of Jesus*, Hendricks argues that Jesus confronted systems crushing the poor, built alternative communities of mutual care, exposed domination as leadership's opposite, and chose faithfulness over grasping for control.

Hendricks shows how Jesus's actions consistently challenged political and economic structures. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he wasn't just performing miracles; he was confronting religious laws used to control people. When Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners, he was building an alternative community that rejected Rome's social hierarchies.

### Confronting Oppressive Systems

Jesus directly challenged religious and political authorities who exploited the poor, widows, and vulnerable. His temple action (Mark 11:15-18) wasn't about personal piety; it was about economic justice and confronting a system that had become a "den of robbers."

### Building Alternative Community

Jesus gathered disciples across social boundaries, creating a community where the last would be first, where service mattered more than status, and where God's justice replaced empire's hierarchies.

### Exposing Domination

Jesus consistently named how power works in the world: through domination, violence, and control. He then modeled a completely different way, showing that true authority comes through love, service, and solidarity with the suffering.

### Faithfulness Over Control

Jesus could have seized political power, led armed rebellion, or compromised with authorities. Instead, he remained faithful to God's way even when it led to the cross, trusting God's justice over human calculations.

# Good News That Costs Something

## Closing Reflections

Mark's Gospel challenges us to see that God's reign confronts every empire, every system of domination, every claim to power that crushes people under its weight. Power in God's kingdom looks like service and sacrifice, not control and violence. Faithfulness matters more than success, and discipleship will cost something real.

This Gospel was written for people under pressure, for communities asking how to follow Jesus when the world seems to be falling apart. Mark's answer is stark and beautiful: stay in the story, return when you've failed, trust that God is present even in suffering, and live as if the kingdom has already arrived.

### God's reign confronts empire

The kingdom of God challenges every competing claim to ultimate power, whether Rome's violence or modern systems that exploit and oppress.

### Power looks like service and sacrifice

Greatness comes through serving others, centering the vulnerable, and choosing faithfulness even when it costs everything.

### Faithfulness matters more than success

Discipleship isn't about winning by the world's standards. It's about staying faithful to God's way even when you're afraid, even when you fail.

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## Discussion Questions

1. What does "good news" challenge in our contemporary context? How does the Gospel confront systems and structures that harm people today?
2. What does faithfulness look like when we don't have certainty, when outcomes are unclear, and when following Jesus costs something real?
3. How should Jesus's politics of service, vulnerability, and justice shape how churches exercise power and leadership in our communities?