

# The Beginnings

by Harris Franklin Rall

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*The sermon explores the beginnings of Jesus' ministry, emphasizing his teachings and the nature of the Kingdom of God.*

**Topics:** "Jesus Christ", "Kingdom Of God"

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## Description

Harris Franklin Rall delves into the Gospels, emphasizing that they are not biographies but sermons meant to lead people to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The Gospels focus on Jesus' ministry, teachings, and the events leading to His death rather than a chronological account of His life. Mark's Gospel outlines five stages in Jesus' life and work, from the beginning of His ministry in Galilee to His final appeal to the people and His crucifixion. Jesus' teaching style, authority, and message of the Kingdom of God are highlighted, showing His unique approach as more than just a prophet.

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## Transcript

It is not easy to trace the outline of Jesus' life in the Gospels. The Gospels are not biographies, and do not claim to be. The fourth Gospel states what is the common purpose of all: "These are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). The Gospels are sermons rather than biographies. In them the materials are collected which the early church used for its preaching. Their interest is to set forth Jesus, that men may believe, not to describe the development of his life or the progress of his work. The first chapters, it is true, give us the story of the beginnings, and at the close there is the story of his sufferings and death. But we cannot be sure of the order of what comes in between. It is not even known how long the period of Jesus' ministry was, and scholars have estimated it at from one to three years or more.

But while we cannot trace out a biography, there are certain questions that must be raised. How did Jesus begin his work, and what was his aim? How did he win his disciples, and how did he make his enemies? And how, in the end, did his death come about? To these questions, the Gospel of Mark, the oldest of the four, gives some reply. If the suggestions of Mark be followed, five stages in the life and work of Jesus may be traced. (1) Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, teaching and ministering to men, drawing great multitudes in apparent success, and gathering a few special followers about him. (2) As the meaning of his teaching becomes clear a change takes place. The people desert him because he does not fulfill their hopes of an earthly kingdom. The scribes and Pharisees grow bitterly hostile because he attacks their teaching and threatens their leadership. The little group of his disciples, however, through Peter,

confesses its faith in him as the Messiah. (3) More and more Jesus withdraws from the crowds and gives himself to the training of the inner circle of his disciples. (4) Finally he turns toward Jerusalem, realizing the danger, but convinced that by his death he is to save men, and that he will return again and set up the Kingdom. (5) His last appeal to the people fails after a brief outburst of enthusiasm, and his life closes with his trial and crucifixion. We shall study the work of Jesus according to this outline, taking up his teachings separately.

How did Jesus begin his work? According to the synoptic Gospels, Jesus began his work quietly and simply as a teacher. Why Jesus did this we can understand from the last chapter. The temptation story shows that he clearly recognized the gulf that lay between his idea of the kingdom and that of the people. With the latter, the kingdom meant an earthly realm. The Messiah was one that would come with splendor and deeds of power, overthrowing their foes and establishing this political realm. For Jesus the Kingdom was spiritual and ethical, a kingdom of righteousness and love. The great obstacle for them was their enemies. The great obstacle for Jesus was ignorance and sin. To have announced himself as Messiah would have defeated all his higher ends. There was only one thing to do. He had fought out the question in the wilderness. He must teach this people the true meaning of the Kingdom, and he must preach to this people and lead them to penitence and to a new life with God.

The fourth Gospel gives a most vivid and interesting narrative of the beginnings of Jesus' work in Judaea. We read here how he meets certain Galileans among the followers of John the Baptist: Andrew and his brother Peter, Philip and probably John, with Nathanael. Such a meeting would explain how Jesus later called these men in Galilee and how they followed him. The later call was not a chance meeting and was not at first sight; the men themselves were men whom he had thus had opportunity to meet before. There are other reasons for thinking that Jesus began his work in Judaea. Mark suggests this when he says that Jesus came into Galilee "after John was delivered up" (Mark 1:14). It seems implied in Jesus' words of lament over Jerusalem, "How often would I have gathered thy children together" (Luke 13:34). If Jesus' ministry lasted more than one year, it is probable that he would at least have attended the yearly passover feasts at Jerusalem.

It is to Galilee that we must turn, however, and to Mark's Gospel, for the first clear and definite account of Jesus' public work. Whatever he may have done in Judaea, it is Galilee that he chooses for the real field of his labor. The city where he begins is not Nazareth, but Capernaum. To this he may well have been led because his friends Peter and Andrew lived there. But there was a stronger reason. Capernaum was a populous city lying on the northwest shore of Lake Galilee, being the chief port for the fishermen of the lake. Round about it lay the most fruitful and populous regions of the province. By it swept the great road that led from Damascus to the Mediterranean. Jesus was here in the midst of a busy pulsing life. Here he could bring his message to the people and from this center he could go through the villages of Galilee. It is Capernaum, with the nearby cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida, that Jesus declared had seen his mighty works (Matt 11:20-24).

We have seen why Jesus would begin his work by teaching and preaching, and this is the way in which the Gospels represent it. "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God" (Mark 1:14). "He went round about the villages teaching" (Mark 6:6). "He was preaching in the synagogues of Galilee" (Luke 4:44). The scribe, or teacher, was a familiar figure with the Jews. Such a life on Jesus' part would excite no wonder. But the people very soon saw with wonder the difference between Jesus and the scribes. The teaching of the scribes all looked to the past, to the law that God had once given and to the traditions that had been built up around it. Jesus spoke directly out of his own heart. "And they were astonished at his

teaching; for he taught them as having authority" (Mark 1:22). And so they called him a prophet, a John or an Elijah (Mark 6:15; 8:28). They rejoiced to think that God had thus come to them again (Luke 7:16). Even after his death it was as "a prophet mighty in deed and word" that his disciples spoke of him (Luke 24:19). His relation to the prophets was evident in his teaching. It was not the priestly and legal side of the Old Testament that appeared in him, but the prophetic. Their disregard of form and ritual, their appeal to conscience, their emphasis on righteousness, all reappear in his teaching.

And yet Jesus was not simply a prophet even in his teaching. The prophets had the special word which was given to them to speak. They came with a "Thus saith the Lord," and spoke only as commanded. Jesus' message is not simply a word given to him. It is a spirit and a life within him. Out of the fullness of that life he speaks. It is no formal message. It is the giving of a life. He gives it in the synagogue or by the wayside, to the thronging multitudes, to the little group of his friends, or to some single soul. He can speak with the passion and power of the prophet, but he can stop to comfort a poor woman or greet a child. And the difference is even more plain in his life. He is more than a messenger; he is a neighbor, a comrade, a friend. He is not the stern executor of fiery judgment that John saw. He can stop to caress the children in the marketplace. He has time for a wedding feast, or to meet Levi's friends at a dinner party, or to rest at the fireside of his intimates. He drew the line at no class. They criticized him because he accepted table hospitality even from "sinners." On the other hand, he was not afraid of the homes of the rich, But we must remember one other thing as we picture this ministry that was so different from that of rabbi or priest or even prophet: while Jesus lived this common life, he never suffered it to be commonplace. He touched all this life only to bless it, and his greatest blessing was to light it up everywhere with the divine life and meaning.

Mark pictures to us with vivid detail the first days at Capernaum. We can understand this detailed knowledge when we remember the probability that it was from Peter himself that Mark obtained this story. Its first incident is the call of the two pairs of brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, all of them fishermen. They had been among those that had answered to John's call, but they had seen in Jesus the One greater than John. Now that he was ready to take up his public work, they were ready to follow him.

The Sabbath at Capernaum comes next. Luke tells us that Jesus was accustomed to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath (4:16). The custom may not only have been for the sake of worship, but because the synagogue worship afforded him, as later on with Paul, an opportunity to give his message. No institution is connected more closely with the beginnings of Christianity than the synagogue. Its worship was simple and democratic. It laid stress upon teaching, as does the Protestant Church with its pulpit and with its Sunday school. It was no mere place of ritual, like the temple. At a stated place in the service there was opportunity for exhortation or for explanation of the Scriptures that had been read. Any one might be called upon here, but especially a visiting teacher or scribe. Here Jesus spoke and astounded them because he did not quote Rabbi This or Rabbi That, but "taught them as having authority."

What Jesus' message was Mark does not record. Luke, however, reports a synagogue address which Jesus gave in his home town of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-22). This must have occurred later in Jesus' ministry. We take it up here because it gives another synagogue scene and because in it Jesus speaks of the aims of his ministry. We can easily imagine the little village synagogue crowded with Jesus' neighbors and boy-time friends, eager to see and hear the young man whose teachings and doings had made such a stir. From the roll of the prophet Isaiah which is given to him Jesus chooses his lesson. The beautiful passage is the confession of his purpose, and descriptive of the work which filled his days at this time:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
Because he anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor:  
He hath sent me to proclaim release to the captives,  
And recovering of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty them that are bruised,  
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Jesus' message begins like that of John. First comes the good news, the word which we translate "gospel": The longed-for kingdom is at the door, the acceptable year is at hand, the rule of God is about to be established. So near at hand did he feel it that he could say, a little later, "There are some here of them that stand by, who shall in no wise taste of death till they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1. Men were to repent, as John declared, but they were to do much more; they were to live like children of their Father by being pure of heart and kindly and merciful in deed. This teaching we must study more fully later. The deeds of healing which Mark records in this story of that first Capernaum Sabbath will occupy the next chapter.

#### Directions for Reading and Study

Mark 1:14-28; Luke 4:14-22; 5:1-11; John I. 35-51.

Locate upon the map Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida. Using the scale of miles, estimate their distance apart. Note the relative position of Nazareth to these three and its approximate distance.

Look carefully through the first five chapters of Mark and note

- (1) the number of passages which refer to Jesus as teaching, and
- (2) the number which refer to the crowds of people that came to him. Make a list of the passages in both cases.

Make a list of the different places and conditions in which Jesus taught as referred to in these five chapters.

Read carefully the accounts of the call of the first disciples as given by Mark, Luke, and John in the references above. Are they necessarily exclusive of each other?

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