The Gospel According to Mark:

The Secret Suffering Savior

A Connections Study Guide

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Mark Introduction

Why begin a study of the four gospels with Mark? The shortest of the four books and sandwiched in between the giants of Matthew and Luke, Mark’s gospel is often overlooked and undervalued. Scholars now believe that among the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), that Mark was the earliest and served as one of the sources for Matthew and Luke. It was named for John Mark, the companion to Peter, Paul, and Barnabas who is mentioned in Acts (Acts 12:12, Acts 12:25, Acts 13:4, Acts 13:13, Acts 15:37-41). Mark is also mentioned by Papias, a bishop of the early church in the 2nd century, as being Peter’s “interpreter” who “wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For Mark had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter.” Mark was an eye-witness to the ministry of Peter, who was the chief disciple of Jesus, thus giving him access to a first-hand account of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection. Scholars believe that Mark wrote his gospel account in Rome during the mid-late ’60s for a primarily Gentile audience who were experiencing horrific persecutions under the Emperor Nero.

This occasion for the writing of the first gospel makes sense given the dominant theme of Mark: suffering. The book of Mark opens with the use of the term “gospel” or “good news” and invokes the Old Testament authority of Isaiah (Mark 1:1-3). It is from Isaiah that we get the true meaning of the word “gospel” (Greek euangelion). The term appears four times in Isaiah:

“You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God.’ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.” (Isa 40:9-10)

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isa 52:7)

“Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.” (Isa 60:6)

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1 For example, there are 662 verses in Mark’s gospel. Matthew includes 609 of them while Luke includes 350 of them.
“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim **good news** to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called mighty oaks, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.” (Isa 61:1-3)

As we can see, the word “gospel” means to proclaim the good news of God’s everlasting reign, which is Mark’s purpose in writing about Jesus. From Jesus’ first words, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”, Mark emphasizes the divinity of Jesus and the in-breaking kingdom that he came to inaugurate. But the verses quoted above are from the section of Isaiah that includes the Suffering Servant, the one whom God would send to suffer for the sins of humanity. This was not the image of the Messiah that most Jews had or desired; they wanted the warrior king who would overthrow Roman oppression and restore Israel to its former glory. If we place Isaiah’s words from 40:9 “Here is your God!” next to Mark’s words in 15:18 when the Romans mockingly proclaim, “Hail, king of the Jews!” as Jesus hangs on the cross, we can see the startling contrast. Mark’s gospel attempts to bridge these two images of Jesus as the Promised One.

Mark also invokes two other Old Testament figures: Moses and Elijah. These two Hebrew prophets make a literal appearance during Jesus’ transfiguration (Mark 9:4), but their presence is felt from the beginning of the gospel. Mark chooses to begin his account of Jesus’ life not with his birth, but with his baptism by John the Baptist. John was widely believed to be the second coming of the prophet Elijah, whose reappearance would signal the coming of God (2 Kings 2:11). Comparisons to Moses and the exodus are suggested when Jesus is tested by Satan in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13). Jesus succeeds where the Israelites failed. But we are also reminded of Moses’ prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:18: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their people, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him.” Like echoes from the past, Mark invites his readers to remember Israel’s past and all that pointed toward the reality of Jesus as the Son of God. Fee and Stuart point out that a major theme in Mark is the “new exodus,” the fulfillment of God’s plan that began in the desert with a rag-tag group of slaves that formed a nation and now comes to glorious culmination with the salvation of the world through Jesus. ³ Mark leaves no doubt that Jesus is the Son of God, a divine being who became flesh and dwelled among us as the living embodiment of God’s compassion and mercy.

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Reading the Gospel of Mark is like watching a movie. It’s fast-paced with terse dialogue and a sense of urgency to tell the story. There’s lots of conflict: between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, Jesus and his disciples, Jesus and demons. There’s a secret that doesn’t get fully revealed until the climax of the story. And there’s an unexpected ending. What we don’t see in Mark is a lot of Jesus’ teachings, parables, and healing miracles. Mark’s primary focus is on who Jesus was as a person, his true identity and mission. If we don’t understand that, then we won’t understand his teachings, parables, and miracles.
The New Exodus

Day 1

Mark 1:1-15

Every story has a beginning. Matthew and Luke chose to begin their story of Jesus’ life and ministry with his birth. John chose to begin with the creation of the universe at which Jesus was present as part of the trinity: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Mark chose to begin at Jesus’ baptism, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah.” But he throws in a quotation from Isaiah, suggesting that the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ goes back hundreds of years when God promised to redeem his people once again. For Mark, Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s ancient promise to bring about his kingdom reign. In one person was wrapped up all the dreams and hopes of generations of Jews who believed that God had forgotten them in exile. In him was the power to restore, to heal, and to save. The challenge was how to announce that God had arrived to inaugurate a new reality in a way that people would believe and repent.

Mark begins by connecting Jesus with Israel’s past, specifically with the exodus. John the Baptist preached in the desert, the place where God changed a group of slaves into a holy nation. In the stark landscape of the wilderness, Israel learned to depend on God and God established a sacrificial system for the atonement of sins. Mark says, “And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance of sins” (Mark 1:4). The phrase “And so” connects John with the prophecy of Isaiah that one would come to prepare the way of the Lord. Jews expected that Elijah would be the messenger who would return to herald the in-breaking kingdom. Mark makes the connection between Elijah and John the Baptist through the passage from Isaiah and through the description of John’s appearance. He leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind about who John the Baptist was.

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4 Mark actually blends verses from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3.
5 In 1 Kings 17:1-5 we first see Elijah living in the wilderness near the Jordan River being provided food by God. In 2 Kings 1:8 Elijah is described as wearing “a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.”
John’s ministry was a baptism of repentance. Baptism in the Jewish tradition did not have the same meaning it has for Christians. Baptism symbolized the purification ritual that prepared the individual to come before God’s altar. Ritual purification was part of the covenant relationship that God ratified at Mount Sinai. John emphasizes that his baptism was merely preparatory to true forgiveness by God himself: “After me comes the 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” (Mark 1:7-8). John clearly makes the distinction between an outward ritual and an inward change. The act of repentance is one of commitment to change, of behaving differently. But it also involves a divine agent that brings about true transformation. I can commit my life to Christ, but he has to work in me to bring about true rebirth, to make me a different person. John could prepare their hearts for repentance, but only God could forgive their sins and give them a clean heart. The desert experience for Israel was one of cleansing and purifying them to receive God’s forgiveness and become a holy nation. Mark makes it clear that with Jesus’ arrival that opportunity would be presented to them again.

Then Jesus arrived: “At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” Mark is a man of few words; he doesn’t write long speeches like John, or use eloquent wording like Matthew. Mark was the Hemingway of gospel writers. He wrote sparingly and expected his readers to fill in the gaps. In this one sentence, Mark conveys a paragraph of meaning. We learn that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, which was considered a backwater town in a border region. I’m sure that Jews in Jesus’ day were expecting God to come in through the front door—Jerusalem. After all, that’s where the temple was. Instead, God came in through the backdoor, the first sign that the arrival of God’s kingdom would not come as they had expected. Jesus did not come in riding on the clouds as prophesied in Daniel 7:13-14, but walking in the dusty wilderness. Also surprising was the fact that Jesus chose to be baptized by John in the Jordan. The Jordan River was the entry point for Israel into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:14-17), further strengthening his association with Israel’s redemptive history. The Jordan was the place where God fulfilled his covenant promise. But why did Jesus choose to be baptized at all?

Jesus’ baptism did not have the same significance as for other people. He did not need to be cleansed or to repent. Jesus’ baptism can be associated with two key verses in Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.” (Isa 61:1)

“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!” (Isa 64:1)

Jesus didn’t need to be forgiven—he needed to be anointed and recognized as the Promised One. This was his consecration ceremony, and John was the Prophet and Priest whom God sent to anoint the Messiah. It was also proof positive that Jesus was the Son of God. All the signs were there—the opening of the heavens, the spirit coming down on Jesus, and God’s voice
proclaiming that this was his beloved son. We are let in on the secret right off the bat. As we watch others struggle to understand Jesus’ true identity, we know the truth. Declaring Jesus as God’s son would have another connotation for the Jews: Israel. In Exodus 4:22 God told Moses to say to Pharaoh: “Israel is my firstborn son.” This familial connection set up the dynamics of redemption whereby God the Father redeemed his son back into the family unit. If we go back even further to Genesis 22:2 we can hear God’s instructions to Abraham to “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah.” Not only is Jesus associated with Israel, God’s firstborn son, but also with Isaac, the sacrificial son.

We might wonder why Mark didn’t open his gospel account with a narrative of Jesus’ birth. In a way, he did. Through his baptism, Jesus was born into the world as the divine son of God. When Jesus emerged from the water and the Holy Spirit came down upon him, he was reborn. We are reminded of what he told Nicodemus in John 3:5-6: “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” John the Baptist sets up this theme of spiritual rebirth when he tells the people: “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8).

When we are baptized, we are reborn into a new life in Christ. It is appropriate that Jesus stepped into the river to show us the way.

Immediately following his baptism Jesus was sent out into the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted by Satan. This was the finishing touch that sealed his association with the exodus. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. Moses told them that during that time God was testing them: “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands” (Deut. 8:2). Where Israel failed the test, Jesus succeeded. All we learn from Mark is that “angels attended him,” but we know from Matthew and Luke that Jesus bested Satan by knowing who he was. Clearly he knew God’s commands and kept them well. He was prepared to begin his ministry of redemption, to inaugurate the good news of God’s salvation. He did not simply proclaim the good news—he embodied it. Just as the heavens had been opened and the Holy Spirit had come down during Jesus’ baptism, the God’s kingdom was now open and available, the Spirit of God had returned to claim his people. “‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near.’”

**Passage for Meditation**

Mark 1:10-11

“Just as Jesus was coming up out 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.’”
Questions for Reflection

1. Mark shows us that the signs were clear that Jesus was the Son of God. Why do you think the people had a difficult time accepting that? Why do people today still resist accepting Jesus as Lord?

2. Does associating Jesus with the exodus in the Old Testament help you to understand his role in God’s redemptive plan for humanity? Why would that association have been important to the Jews?

Imaginative Exercise

Imagine yourself being baptized by John the Baptist. As you emerge from the water you hear God’s voice saying, “You are my Son/Daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” How would God’s declaration of love make you feel? Can you feel his Spirit come upon you? Journal about this imaginative experience.
Recognizing Jesus

Day 2

Mark 1:16-45

I find it interesting that in Mark’s gospel Jesus comes out of nowhere, gets baptized by John, and then disappears into the wilderness for 40 days. When he reappears in Galilee to begin his ministry, the men he chooses to be his disciples just seem to drop everything and follow him. There’s no indication in the text that they knew who he was when he summoned them to follow him. They recognized something in him that compelled them to follow, but Mark leaves it to our imagination to fill in the blanks. There’s no miraculous catch here as there was in Luke’s gospel. There were no eyewitnesses to Jesus’ baptism as there were in John’s gospel. These fishermen simply believed and they went “at once.”

When Jesus entered the synagogue in Capernaum and began teaching, the people also recognized his authority (Mark 1:22). This man was different from the other teachers; he seemed to understand the scriptures at a deeper level, as if he had written them. “Just then” (as if on cue!) a demon inside one of the congregants recognized Jesus and called him by name: “Jesus of Nazareth…Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). Jesus commanded the spirit to leave the man and the spirit obeyed him. Not only did Jesus teach with “authority,” but he also demonstrated authority over evil. When he healed he demonstrated his authority over life and death. Only God can do such things. The onlookers “were all so amazed” at Jesus’ authority to drive out evil spirits that they spread the word about this stranger who spoke like God himself.

Mark’s gospel reads like an action-adventure novel. Phrases like “as soon as,” “just then,” and “immediately” pepper his narrative, giving it a breathless quality. Jesus was in a hurry; there was no time to waste. It’s fun to compare Mark with John. In John’s gospel Jesus gives long speeches that last entire chapters. In Mark’s gospel Jesus gets right to the point and then moves on. He’s a man on a mission, and our job as readers is to determine what that mission is.

So “as soon as they left the synagogue” Jesus and his disciples went to the home of Simon (aka Peter) and Andrew where Simon’s mother-in-law was very sick. They “immediately told Jesus” and he healed her with little fanfare. He simply helped her up and she gratefully served him (Mark 1:31). In the span of 10 verses we’ve seen Jesus teach with authority, cast out demons, and heal a severely sick woman. It’s no wonder that news of this miracle worker spread quickly throughout Galilee and the people came in droves to be healed. Jesus will be more successful in
Galilee than in Jerusalem because there, on the frontier, people are more willing to believe. Mark gives us the impression that Jesus was well received everywhere he went and he was able to heal entire towns because of their faith in him. That’s why Mark frontloads the healing miracles; the closer they get to Jerusalem the less frequent become the healings.

Mark indicates that Jesus was not altogether comfortable with his new-found fame. When he tried to get some downtime, the disciples came looking for him saying, “Everyone is looking for you!” (Mark 1:37). Jesus’ response was, “Let us go somewhere else.” Twice he tells the demons to be quiet “because they knew who he was” (Mark 1:34). When he healed a man with leprosy, he “sent him away at once with a strong warning: ‘See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them’” (Mark 1:43-44). Why would Jesus want to keep his miracles a secret?

This is one of the great questions at the heart of Mark’s gospel. For the first half of the book Jesus appears secretive about his mission and who he really is. Many scholars have debated the meaning of Jesus’ secrecy. Some suggest it was because Jesus did not want to instigate trouble prematurely until he had done all that he came to do. Some suggest that the hiddenness of Jesus’ identity represented the hiddenness of God’s rule. Others posit that no one could have understood Jesus’ identity until after his death and resurrection—events had to play out fully before all would be revealed. Whatever the explanation, there’s no question that in Mark Jesus was determined to keep his true identity under wraps until the appropriate time. Jesus would decide when the appointed time would be. The more we read Mark, however, it becomes painfully clear that even when Jesus revealed the entire plan to his disciples or his adversaries, they did not understand it. Without divine revelation and the power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot comprehend who God is or how he operates. We can’t see the world as God sees it without the lense of faith. Only then do we truly recognize Jesus in all his glory.

Passage for Meditation

Mark 1:16-17

“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 send you out to fish for people.’ At once they left their nets and followed him.”

Questions for Reflection

1. Why do you think the disciples left their lives to follow Jesus? Think about when you made the decision to follow Christ. Why did you choose to follow him?
2. Scholars believe that Jesus was most successful in Galilee because the people there recognized his authority and believed in his power to heal. Why is faith such an important part of healing? Did Peter’s mother-in-law have faith?
Imaginative Exercise

Imagine yourself as one of the disciples whom Jesus called by the Sea of Galilee. Write an account of meeting this stranger and why you chose to follow him.
The Son of Man Revealed

Day 3

Mark 2:1-3:6

What a difference from chapter 1 when Jesus’ authority was recognized by everyone, even the demons! In this chapter, his authority is questioned by those who are most threatened by Jesus’ message. Mark shows us four examples when Jesus comes into conflict with Jewish tradition.

The first is one of my favorite healing stories. In Mark’s gospel we hear a lot about the “crowds.” These represent large numbers of people who show up wherever Jesus goes. They aren’t necessarily his followers; they are either curiosity-seekers or they want something from him. In this case, the crowd was so large that it prevented four men from bringing their paralyzed friend to be healed. Out of desperation they figure out that they can dig a hole through the thatched roof of the house and lower their friend down to where Jesus was preaching. This must have been quite a sight! Jesus’ response to this desperate act of faith was somewhat surprising for those watching. He wasn’t upset by being interrupted. He merely said, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5). Mark likes to use questions to prompt the reader, so he plants one in the mouths of the “teachers of the law” (the scribes): “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). They’ve answered their own question! But not to let a good teachable moment pass, Jesus affirms their suspicion: “the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Mark 2:10).

This is the first time in Mark that Jesus refers to himself as the “Son of Man,” and it’s the first time that he confirms his true identity. This is Jesus’ favorite way to refer to himself. It appears 14 times in Mark, 30 times in Matthew, 25 times in Luke, and 13 times in John. In Hebrew Son of Man was a fairly common way to refer to an ordinary person. It’s used 93 times in the book of Ezekiel to refer to the prophet, a humble human being speaking for God. It would not have been associated with the Messiah, except for one reference in Daniel 7:13-14: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be

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destroyed.” It is in this context that Jesus’ comment in Mark 2:10 makes sense: he is a human being (son of man) who has been given divine authority and sovereign power. Christopher Wright points out that Jesus’ use of the title Son of Man falls into three categories: 1) his authority over sin and sickness, 2) his destiny to suffer, die, and be resurrected (Mark 8:31), and his second coming (Mark 14:62). As we can see, if those around him had paid careful attention to how he used the title Son of Man, they would have seen his true identity in all its glory. But they expected a Messiah, an anointed warrior-king who would restore Israel to its former glory, not the suffering servant who would humble himself and die for the sins of the world. By using the phrase Son of Man, Jesus could hide in plain sight, knowing that his audience would not understand its significance until all had been revealed at the cross.

Jesus continued to confound the authorities. He ate with “sinners and tax collectors,” he and his disciples did not practice ritual fasting, and, worst of all, they worked on the Sabbath. Each of these incidents gave Jesus the opportunity to provide a nifty quotation that encapsulates his teaching.

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:17)

“How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.” (Mark 2:19-20)

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If they do, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And people do not pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.” (Mark 2:21-22)

“The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27-28)

I’m astounded at how much teaching Mark packs into 27 verses! He wastes no time in showing us the big picture: this is the Son of God who has all authority in heaven and on earth, and whose message directly conflicts with the religious thought and practice of the day. Of course, it’s not Jesus who is changing the rules. Jesus is the original; the Jewish leaders are a copy of a copy of a copy—the product of generations of changing God’s law to fit human purposes. Jesus is not challenging God’s law, he is returning to its original meaning.

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8 Matthew 5:17
The Sabbath is a good example. Jesus reminded them that the Sabbath was a gift from God to humans at the beginning of the world. They had turned it into a weapon with which to control and punish. At the end of Mark 2 and beginning of Mark 3 we have two stories that illustrate how far the Pharisees had strayed from the original intent of God’s law. In the first story, they accused Jesus and his disciples of picking grain on the Sabbath. Jesus responded by comparing himself to David, who allowed his men to eat consecrated bread when they were hungry. The fact that Jesus compares himself to King David is significant, since the prophets made it clear that the Messiah would come from a Davidic branch. But Jesus is not merely David’s descendent; he is the originator, the Lord, of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). The next story illustrates this in even more dire circumstances. Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath; more importantly, he healed him in the synagogue surrounded by so-called religious men. Jesus was angry at the lack of compassion he saw among them. If they truly understood the Torah they would know that God’s law was based on love and compassion. Instead, they just focused on the rules and practices of the law. Justice without compassion is as empty as faith without works. Jesus performed a radical (and revolutionary) act of mercy by healing the man’s hand on the Sabbath, and for that act the “Herodians” began plotting to eliminate him. The term “Herodians” is interesting. It was not an official title of any group in first century Judaism. It signals the close alliance between the Jewish authorities and the government of Herod Antipas. Mark clearly shows us in chapter 2 the conflict that rapidly escalated when Jesus’ authority came into contact with the Jewish religious authorities. Early in Mark’s gospel he makes it clear that Jesus would suffer for bringing a new kingdom message into the lifeless traditions that passed for faith. He would be the new wineskin into which would be poured the new wine.

**Passage for Meditation**

Mark 2:21-22

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If they do, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And people do not pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. What surprises you about the way that Jesus refers to himself in this chapter? Can you understand why the Jewish authorities would have felt threatened by Jesus’ teaching and healing?
2. Re-read the passage for meditation. What do you think Jesus meant by pouring new wine into new wineskins? Have you ever felt the need to start something new in your life? Are there old wineskins that you need to discard?
3. Has there been a time in your life when you witnessed religious legalism divorced from compassion? Why is this division a threat to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

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Imaginative Exercise

Is there someone in your life who needs healing? Imagine carrying that person to Jesus as the friends in chapter 2 lowered their paralyzed friend down through the roof. How can your faith help someone else to heal?
Israel Reconstituted

Day 4

Mark 3:7-35

In chapter 3 Mark brilliantly uses the themes of outside vs inside and many vs few to reveal something about Jesus’ true agenda. In verse 7 we see that Jesus tried to “withdraw” from the crowds with his disciples, but a “large crowd” followed them. It seems that celebrity was no different then than now—there’s no privacy for the famous. So Mark tells us that “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (Mark 3:13-15). Once again Mark packs a lot of theological meaning into a couple of sentences. Mountains in the gospels are significant; they represent important kingdom moments (the Sermon on the Mount, the Mount of Transfiguration, the Mount of Olives). In this case we should be reminded of Mount Sinai in the Old Testament, where God called to himself his chosen people and made them into a holy nation. Likewise, Jesus “called” 12 disciples (representing the 12 tribes of Israel) to him.

Mark notes that Jesus called “those he wanted” (Mark 3:13). Jesus chose them, they did not choose Jesus. In John 15:16, Jesus reminded his disciples right before his arrest: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit.” Here in Mark we see the beginning of that call. The TNIV version tells us that Jesus “appointed” the twelve. The King James Version uses the word “ordained.” The original Greek word, however, was “made.” Jesus made them his disciples. I love this translation because it reminds us that God is still creating us. He doesn’t just take us as we are and do the best he can with what’s there. He makes us into the people he needs us to be. That’s what Jesus did with this rag-tag band of fishermen, tax collectors, and zealots. He made them apostles of the gospel before they fully understood what the gospel was. He not only taught them, but he also endowed them with his own authority to preach and to heal.

This is where the comparison with the nation of Israel is so powerful. When God called the Hebrews to him at Mount Sinai he said: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exo. 19:5-6). There are many places in the gospel where Jesus reenacts moments from the exodus and this is one of them. Like God, he has called his chosen people to him in order to make them into something special, something
holy. When God looked out over the mass of dusty travelers, he didn’t see a group of slaves—he saw priests. When Jesus looked at this group, he didn’t see rough working men—he saw “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” (1 Peter 2:9). God’s purpose for Israel and Jesus’ purpose for his disciples was not to set them apart for their own sake; their purpose was to send them out to change the world, to bear fruit. Being a Christian means more than just securing our own personal salvation; we are all called to be apostles of the good news for the salvation of the world. We are chosen by God for a purpose.

After he shows us the reconstitution of the house of Israel, Mark shifts to a literal house to explain what it means to be part of the family of God. Again the crowd followed them and interfered with their private time. For the first time Mark mentions Jesus’ biological family: “When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him” (Mark 3:21). What happens next is a common technique that Mark employs called the “sandwich.” He embeds a story within a story, where the embedded story helps us to understand the larger story. Into the conflict between the crowd and Jesus’ family come the “teachers of the law” who came from Jerusalem just to accuse Jesus of working for Satan (Mark 3:22). Jesus takes this wild accusation as an opportunity to make a point about the house of Israel: “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand” (Mark 3:25). He ignores the original comment (which was silly considering that the demons themselves identified him as the son of God) and makes a more important point: family is more about unity than blood. Throughout the gospel accounts Jesus tells stories of when a foreigner showed greater faith than a Jew (the parable of the Good Samaritan is a great example). He did this to remind the Jews that being “chosen” by God doesn’t mean that they are automatically in by birthright. They must demonstrate their love and loyalty. Jesus does here what he does so well throughout the gospel of Mark: he throws their accusation back at them (though they probably don’t even recognize it). He takes their comment about blasphemy and hurtles it back at them: “But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (Mark 3:29). The purpose for which God called Israel to be his holy nation was to bring the light of salvation to the world. These Jewish leaders were trying to keep the world away through their rules and false accusations. They were trying to divide rather than unite.

Now Mark returns to the original story. With his family standing outside and his disciples with him inside the house, Jesus says, “Who are my mother and my brothers?...Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33-34). Jesus wasn’t saying that he didn’t love his family, but that he chose God’s family first. We are all adopted into God’s family through faith, not through the accident of birth. We are one in the Spirit.

Passage for Meditation

Mark 3:13

“Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him.”
Questions for Reflection

1. Do you feel called by Jesus? What do you think is the purpose of your calling?
2. How can we apply Jesus’ teaching about unity to the church today? Where do you see evidence of a house divided against itself?

Imaginative Exercise

Make a list of 12 people you know who are fully committed to Christ. What fruit are they bearing as evidence of their faithful commitment? What can you learn from their witness?
The Generous Sower

Day 5

Mark 4:1-35

One of the things about Jesus that most people know is that he taught using parables. These are stories about common people or things that represent some abstract truth about God’s kingdom. James Edwards defines a parable as “something that is placed alongside something else for the purpose of clarification.” The odd thing about Jesus’ parables, however, is that they rarely clarify anything! In fact, they often left Jesus’ disciples stupefied. In their book *Mark as Story*, David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie suggest that Jesus’ stories should be called riddles instead: “The narrator treats the riddles as cryptic, because characters in the story (and the reader) must decipher them in order for their meaning to be disclosed. The Markan riddles are about the hidden presence of the rule of God in the story world; that is, they are cryptic stories about a hidden reality.” In other words, the source of the confusion about the meaning of Jesus’ parables was the fact that the truth that Jesus was describing was so different from the reality his audience knew.

A great example of this comes in 4:1-8 with the parable of the sower. This is one of the most famous parables; it describes a farmer who scattered his seed over various types of soil: on the path, in shallow soil, among thorns, and on good soil. We’ve all heard sermons preached on this parable that tell us it’s about our receptiveness to God’s word—we are the different soils. That makes a good sermon, but to the agrarian audience listening to Jesus this story would have been baffling. Why would a farmer waste his precious seeds by scattering them over soil that would never produce crops? Farmers are careful with their seeds. First they plow the soil and then they drop the seeds into the furrows. The farmer that Jesus describes must have sounded like a wild man to them, or at the least a very bad farmer. To make matters worse, Jesus ends the story with this cryptic line: “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear” (Mark 4:9). Of course we have ears! What does Jesus mean?

Mark knew this would be baffling to his readers, so he inserted a story-within-a-story when Jesus was alone with his disciples and revealed to them the meaning of the parable. He also explains why he speaks in parables. He tells them that they have been given “the secret of the

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kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11). In other words, they have been given the key to crack the code. Jesus’ cryptic comments about people on the outside “ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding” is an allusion to a cryptic message given to Isaiah by God in Isaiah 6:9-10: “He said, ‘Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.’” Isaiah was just as baffled by this directive as the disciples were. The fact is that we don’t always understand God’s plan at the beginning. Our job is to obey and trust that God’s truth will be revealed to us at some point. We need to pay attention, to actively “hear” the word, until we understand it with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God’s kingdom is not a puzzle we can solve; it is revealed to us in God’s time.

That brings us back to the parable of the sower. Jesus gives us a clue to its true meaning: “The farmer sows the word” (Mark 4:14). This is the parable of the sower, not the parable of the soil. Jesus is the sower who generously spread God’s word in every corner of the world. Jesus didn’t just preach in the synagogue or in Jerusalem where the “good soil” was. He traveled all over preaching the gospel. He knew that some people would reject him, but that did not discourage him. Notice that the good seed “produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times” (Mark 4:8). That’s an amazing harvest! Jesus tells another story of a man who scatters seed on the ground that grows without any effort on his part. “All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come” (Mark 4:28-29). This, too, would have sounded strange to farmers who work very hard to make their crops grow. How could a harvest come from no effort? Jesus is trying to show them God’s reality where God is the farmer and only he makes things grow. Paul uses this same metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3 to explain that we should not boast in our own accomplishments: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (v. 6-7).

We live in a world of high achievers. We believe that we can do anything we put our minds to. Jesus and Paul remind us that apart from God we can do nothing. God is the sower who generously spreads his grace and grows a harvest in places we never thought possible. The church is exploding in areas of our world that we would consider bad soil. And right here in our own country God’s word is falling on hard ground that is not receptive to the good news of Jesus Christ. James Edwards reminds us that “God is at work—hidden and unobserved—in Jesus and the gospel to produce a yield wholly disproportionate to human prospects and merit.”12 In God’s kingdom, the harvest does not depend on the quality of the soil but on the extravagant generosity of the sower.

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Passage for Meditation

Mark 4:20

“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred times what was sown.”

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you seen the seed of faith grow in places you never thought possible? What does this tell you about God’s kingdom?
2. Where are you sowing God’s word? Do you ever get discouraged and think you are wasting your time? What do Jesus’ parables in chapter 4 and Paul’s words to the Corinthians tell you about ministry?

Imaginative Exercise

Write a modern version of the parable of the sower. What would represent the different soils in our world? Where do you see a bountiful harvest?
The story in Mark 4 where Jesus calms the storm on the lake is longer and more detailed than the accounts in Matthew or Luke. Commentators credit Peter with the eyewitness-type detail such as, “Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him” (Mark 4:36). This level of realism makes the story all the more remarkable when we get to the description of the storm: “A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.” This is a frightening scene given our understanding from archeological evidence of how small these fishing boats were. The contrast between the frightened fishermen (it must have been bad to frighten fishermen) and the sleeping Jesus is astonishing. They woke him up asking, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (Mark 4:38). Matthew records that they asked Jesus to save them (Matt 8:25), but not so in Mark or Luke. In Mark’s gospel it’s not clear what they expected Jesus to do, but obviously it wasn’t to calm the storm. When he does command the storm to quiet, they are amazed: “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41).

It’s not surprising that they would have this reaction. From ancient times people feared the sea. They associated it with chaos and death. Their greatest fear came true when God destroyed all life on earth with a flood in Genesis 6-8. When Moses parted the Red Sea, God demonstrated that he was the creator of the universe who controlled the elements (Exo. 14:31). The disciples’ questions at the end of chapter 4 are rhetorical, since the answer is obvious: only God can control the elements. When Moses parted the Red Sea and later when Joshua parted the Jordan River, both men were acting under God’s command. Here Jesus was acting under his own initiative. If he could quiet a storm, he could do anything. We are reminded of Psalm 107:28-29: “Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed.” Mark suggests that they were more frightened of Jesus’ divine authority than they were of the storm: “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (Mark 4:40).

The next story is an even more amazing example of Jesus’ power. The only thing that the people feared more than the sea was Satan. Both represented the realm of chaos that could overpower them. Mark tells us that “they went across the lake” (Mark 5:1). They are met by a demon-possessed man. We must first understand the setting of this encounter. They have crossed over
to Gentile country. It is getting dark and they meet a man who lives among the tombs. Throw in a herd of pigs and this describes every Jew’s greatest nightmare. They are in the realm of Satan. We know this because this man He was possessed by a legion of demons (Mark 5:9). A legion of the Roman army was usually 3000 to 6000 soldiers! When Jesus sent the demons into the herd of pigs, 2000 pigs went over the cliff into the lake (Mark 5:13). An army of demons was dwelling in this man. He was as wild as the sea during the storm: “he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him” (Mark 5:4). Mark’s comment that “no one was strong enough to subdue him” reminds us of Jesus’ parable of the strong man’s house in Mark 3:27 when he suggested that he is the Strong Man who can subdue Satan. He is about to demonstrate that in a dramatic way. Jesus could subdue Satan just as he subdued the waves. Jesus’ command to the waves to “Quiet! Be still!” in Mark 4:39 sounds like his command to the demon in Mark 1:25, “Be quiet!” Jesus has power over nature and demons with a single word, just as God had spoken nature into existence in Genesis 1. His word is all powerful. The signs are all there, pointing to the fact that Jesus is God. If we don’t quite get it yet, the demons help us out by calling him “Jesus, Son of the Most High God” (Mark 5:7). There is no place that Jesus does not have authority on water or on land. There is no storm too great for him to quiet.

What fascinates me about this story is not so much the miracle itself, but the way others reacted to the miracle. We have already noticed that the disciples reacted to Jesus’ calming the storm with fear. Here again, the people who saw the man who was once possessed by demons acting perfectly sane “were afraid” (Mark 5:15). Instead of following Jesus, they asked him to leave their region. It’s certainly understandable that being in the awesome presence of God would be unsettling. After standing at Mount Sinai and witnessing the mountain tremble with God’s power, the Israelites “trembled with fear” (Exo. 20:18). They told Moses that they would rather have him speak for God than hear God’s voice directly (Exo. 20:19). This fear is another sign that they are in the presence of the living God. But the disciples will have to choose between fear and faith, just as the crowds will have to choose between following Jesus and sending him away. Mark emphasizes the conflict that followed Jesus wherever he went. People had to choose between their current reality and the reality that Jesus offered them. Not everyone will choose to follow Jesus. We, too, are faced with this choice. Will we put faith over fear? Will we allow Jesus to fundamentally alter our lives in order to improve them? Will we allow Jesus to calm the storm within us?

Passage for Meditation

Mark 4:40-41

“He said to his disciples, ‘Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?’ They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’”
Questions for Reflection

1. Why would the witnesses to Jesus’ miracles have been afraid rather than overjoyed? In what way is God as terrifying as Satan?
2. What storm is raging in your life or within you that Jesus needs to quiet? How can you choose faith over fear?

Imaginative Exercise

Imagine yourself as one of the disciples in the boat with Jesus during the storm. What emotions were they experiencing before and after Jesus commanded the waves to be still?
Healing Touch

Day 7

Mark 5:21-43

These verses contain what may be Mark’s most brilliant narrative “sandwich,” a story of healing embedded within a story of healing. The scenarios are well known: Jairus, a Jewish leader, begs Jesus to heal his dying daughter. On their way, a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years touches Jesus’ robe in the crowd and is instantly healed. Jesus then brings Jairus’ daughter back to life. Rather than view these as two different stories, we need to look for the connections between them. Why would Mark include a healing on the way to a healing?

Jairus is a “synagogue leader,” which means that he risked his reputation to come to Jesus, fall at his feet, and beg him to heal his daughter. Notice how often risk is associated with healing. The men who lowered their friend through the roof on a mat took great physical risk just to get to Jesus. Jairus took a political risk in acknowledging that Jesus is a miracle worker: “Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live” (Mark 5:23). Mark tells us that “he pleaded earnestly” and we can hear that in his voice. He’s desperate and willing to defy social convention to humble himself before the one man who can save his daughter.

Jesus went with him. Jesus was always willing to be detoured in his journeys. He went where he was needed; his agenda never took precedence over an opportunity to proclaim the good news. Every act was the gospel in a nutshell. Along the way, a woman who had suffered for 12 years with a bleeding disorder fought her way through the crowd to touch his cloak. There are several remarkable things about this scene. First, this woman should not have been out in public according to Jewish purity laws. She was supposed to be isolated, not in the middle of a crowd where people could accidentally touch her and become unclean. She risked shame (or worse) to be near Jesus. I wonder how she just happened to be in the crowd when Jesus passed. Being a celebrity, word of Jesus’ passing through must have reached her and she saw this as her last chance, just as Jairus saw Jesus as the last chance for his daughter’s healing. Both Jairus and the bleeding woman defied Jewish law to come to Jesus. Their belief in him was stronger than their fear of public scorn.

I love the way Mark narrates the encounter between Jesus and the woman. The text says, “Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering” (Mark 5:29). Likewise, “At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him.” I
can just imagine that moment when she touches his robe and they both stop because they felt something important had happened. It reminds me of the lyrics to that wonderful Gaither song, *He Touched Me*:

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He touched me, oh he touched me,
And oh the joy that floods my soul.
Something happened and now I know
He touched me and made me whole.
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Her healing was instantaneous, but something happened to Jesus as well. He stopped and asked “Who touched my clothes?” A detour on the way to a detour! Mark tells us that he kept looking around until he found her. He was as persistent in finding her as she was in getting close to him. When they finally met face-to-face, Jesus blessed her: “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering” (Mark 5:34). To a woman who has been socially ostracized for 12 years, these words of affection and compassion must have been just as healing as touching Jesus. Jesus was never satisfied to just heal people physically; he was much more concerned with their spiritual healing. He touched her this time, called her “daughter,” and sent her away a whole person. With one gesture, he welcomed her back into the family of God and made her feel loved. We should never doubt the power of a compassionate word spoken to someone who desperately needs to hear it.

The delay was costly for Jairus’ daughter. They received word that the girl had died. Jesus proceeded to his home and touched the dead girl. He spoke to her, as he had to the woman, and “immediately” she was alive and well. We now understand the scene better because of the previous healing. It was the faith of Jairus, like the faith of the bleeding woman, that made this healing possible. Both individuals sought Jesus out and believed he could heal. The woman had been bleeding for 12 years—the entire lifespan of this young girl. In God’s eyes they were both his daughters, regardless of their circumstances or social status.

Perhaps the most intriguing similarity is that they were both unclean according to Jewish law. As a Jew, Jesus was supposed to avoid contact with bleeding women and dead bodies. Instead, he sought them out and touched them intentionally. In his brilliant sermon series on the gospel of Mark, Dr. Timothy Tennant points out that Jesus turned the tables on Jewish law: instead of becoming unclean by touching an unclean person, Jesus made clean whomever he touched.13 Instead of Jesus catching leprosy from lepers, the lepers “caught” health from Jesus! We are reminded of David’s famous psalm on repentance: “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:7). Only God can make someone clean through the power of forgiveness. Only God can heal. Healing is a relationship between the person and God. In both cases of healing in this chapter Jesus had a tender, intimate moment

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with the women. It wasn’t business as usual; it was the act of a loving father. The healing touch of Jesus does more than just heal our afflictions and infirmities; it returns us to wholeness within a right relationship with him.

**Passage for Meditation**

Mark 5:34

“He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.’”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. What do these stories teach you about healing? Have you ever felt Jesus’ healing touch?
2. We do not live under Jewish purity laws, but are there still people in our society who are viewed as socially “unclean”? How could you extend Jesus’ healing touch to them?

**Imaginative Exercise**

If you are in need of healing, or know someone who is in need of healing, ask a group of fellow believers to lay hands on you or them and pray for healing. Journal about the experience.
Day 8

Mark 6:1-31

We move from two stunning examples of faith to a stunning example of faithlessness. One of the things I appreciate about Mark as a storyteller is that he orchestrates these jarring moments when the reader gets whiplash from the stark contrast. We can only imagine how these moments felt to Jesus and his disciples as they moved from place to place. In some places they were received with adulation and in some places they were shunned or attacked. In this chapter Jesus headed south from Capernaum to Nazareth, his hometown. We should notice that the closer Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the more faithlessness and conflict he encounters.

Chapter 6 starts out well; in fact, we've seen this scene before in Mark 1. Jesus is teaching brilliantly in the synagogue. Those who were fortunate enough to hear him were amazed: “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?” (Mark 6:2). But instead of opening their minds to the possibility of what God was doing in that place, they shut their minds: “Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him” (Mark 6:3). My mind boggles at this. These people watched Jesus grow up! Surely they knew there was something special about him. To paraphrase Mark Lowry's brilliant Christmas song, “Nazareth, did you know?” They were hearing the same teaching that people in other towns had heard. They witnessed the same miracles. Yet their hearts were hardened. Jesus diagnosed their problem immediately: “Only in their own towns, among their relatives and in their own homes are prophets without honor” (Mark 6:4). This time it was Jesus’ turn to be amazed at their lack of faith.

What Jesus describes is what psychologists call “cognitive dissonance.” That is, when presented with facts or ideas that contradict their prevailing belief system, humans will often reject the presenting fact or idea. They can't hold two conflicting ideas at once—and the existing belief system usually wins the day. Despite hearing Jesus preach with authority and witnessing his healing miracles, the people of Nazareth still chose to reject him as the Son of God in order to preserve their view of him as just a local boy. How often do parents do this to their children: trap them in a preconceived idea of who they are? A similar thing happened after the healing of the Gerasene demoniac in chapter 5; the crowd who witnessed the miracle chose to reject Jesus rather than change their way of thinking. So, when Jesus prepared his disciples to go out in his
name, he prepared them to encounter conflict and rejection: “And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them” (Mark 11). Deep-set ideas are stubborn things.

News of Jesus’ success reached Herod. People were claiming that Jesus was the reincarnation of John the Baptist, whom he had had killed. This sets up a flashback wherein Mark tells the story of John’s death by beheading. Mark hasn’t mentioned John since 1:14, but he inserts the narrative of John’s death here in between the story of the sending out of the disciples and their coming back. Mark devotes 12 verses to the story, almost as many as he did to the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. John’s story illustrates the suffering prophet that Jesus alluded to in v. 4. Those who tell the truth can expect to suffer at the hands of those who want to control the story. Herod married his brother’s wife, Herodias, and John had questioned the legality of the marriage under Jewish law. We are told that Herodias “nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him” (Mark 6:19). I am reminded of Queen Jezebel who threatened to kill Elijah for killing the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 19:2. As Pontius Pilate would do at Jesus’ trial, Herod felt coerced into ordering John’s death. We are meant to draw a comparison between Jesus and John, understanding that Jesus will suffer the same senseless death at the hands of a weak-willed despot.

I see two types of people represented in these stories. The people of Nazareth rejected the idea that Jesus was the Son of God despite the evidence. There will always be those who cannot be convinced to change their way of thinking, even in the presence of overwhelming evidence. That’s why you can’t argue someone into believing. Faith is not merely a matter of logic; it’s a matter of the heart, and some people’s hearts are hardened. But I wonder about people like Herod: did he actually believe, but still chose to reject Jesus because he did not want to threaten his own power? The first mention of the plot to kill Jesus occurs in Mark 3:6. Following the healing of the man with a withered hand, the Pharisees plotted with the “Herodians.” Now, the Pharisees were the sworn enemies of the Herodians. They did not recognize Roman authority over Jews. So this was an unholy alliance solely for the purpose of eliminating a threat to their own authority and power. They did not deny that Jesus had healed the man, but they did not like the fact that he challenged the Sabbath restrictions, which were their purview. More urgently, they sensed that Jesus was changing the rules altogether. As “the self-appointed guardians of Israel’s ancestral traditions,” they were duty-bound to protect their way of life. But Jesus was proposing a new way of living. As N.T. Wright puts it, “the inbreaking kingdom Jesus was announcing created a new world, a new context, and he was challenging his hearers to become the new people that this new context demanded, the citizens of this new world.”

Both the Pharisees and Herod stood to lose a great deal if he succeeded. If Herod was willing to kill John the Baptist, whom he “feared” and believed to be a holy man (Mark 6:20), how much further would he go to kill Jesus who was claiming to be the Son of God himself? Matthew

15 Ibid, p. 46.
suggested in his gospel that Herod believed that the child born to Mary and Joseph was the Messiah prophesied in scripture (Matt. 1:3-6) and set out to kill him. Even the demons believed Jesus was the Son of God! **Belief and faith are not the same thing.**

The fact is, however, that Isaiah foretold that the servant God sent to save the world would suffer. In Isaiah 53 we get a heart-breaking portrait of the Promised One who “was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” (v. 3). Then he makes this baffling prophecy: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (v. 5). The Jews did not know what to make of this prophecy, since they expected the Messiah would be a warrior-king, not a sacrificial lamb. But that’s Mark’s point: Jesus did not come in the form expected or with a message that was market-tested. Anyone familiar with Isaiah 53 should not have been surprised when Jesus suffered and died, but humans can be amazingly selective in their memory.

Mark has another reason for embedding the story of John’s death within the story of sending out the disciples: discipleship has a cost. Jesus sent the disciples out, two by two, to do what he was doing—preaching, driving out demons, and healing. This was unheard of in rabbinic Judaism; rabbis did not send their disciples out without them. But Jesus was heralding a new way of spreading the gospel; he was fulfilling God’s creation command to Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). We are witnessing the beginnings of the church. When they return, Mark refers to them, for the first time, as “apostles.” But as Mark’s audience in first century Rome was experiencing, being a follower of Christ also meant being persecuted as he was persecuted. Scholars believe that Mark’s gospel was written following the crucifixion of Peter. Isaiah’s description of the suffering servant in chapter 53 did not only describe Jesus—it could also apply to any who carry out his mission to bring about God’s kingdom.

When the disciples returned from their mission, Jesus saw their weariness (and hunger!) and showed them compassion: “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31), just as he would go off to a quiet place to rest in his Father after pouring himself out. That is the pattern of discipleship: calling, then sending out, and then resting in Jesus.

**Passage for Meditation**

Mark 6:7

“Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits.”
Questions for Reflection

1. Since Christians in our country no longer live under the threat of persecution, what does the cost of discipleship mean to you? Should faith come without a price?

2. Christians all over the world today are being persecuted for their faith, just as the early Christians were persecuted by the Romans. What does this tell you about the inbreaking kingdom of God? How would a Christian living in a Muslim country read this chapter in Mark differently from a Christian living in the United States?

Imaginative Exercise

As Christians living in a predominantly Christian country we don’t face physical harm, but what other types of suffering might we face? Think about what it means to live a Christian life in the United States and list the types of conflict that we are likely to experience. Perhaps you have already experienced conflict for the sake of Christ. Describe that experience.
Day 9

Mark 6:32-52

The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle that all four gospels share in common. Think about that. Of all the material we have about Jesus’ earthly life, the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus’ passion are the only two stories that appear in all four gospel accounts. This means that we need to pay careful attention to discern why all four gospel writers thought this story was critical to understanding Jesus’ ministry.

The first important detail to notice is that Jesus and the disciples retreated to “a solitary place” (Mark 6:32). Their intention was to spend time alone for rest, but the crowds anticipated their destination and got there before them. The text tells us that when Jesus saw them “he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). This comment would have had deep theological meaning for anyone familiar with Jewish scripture. In Ezekiel 34, the Lord castigates the religious leaders for being bad shepherds who had neglected his sheep. He tells them, “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As shepherds look after their scattered flocks when they are with them, so will I look after my sheep” (v. 11-12). When Jesus saw the crowds so hungry for God’s word, he responded as a shepherd, as the Shepherd. What we notice about Mark is that he’s less interested in what Jesus taught than who he was. Mark is the master of understatement: “So he began teaching them many things” (Mark 6:34). I can just imagine Matthew, Luke, and John pulling their hair out reading this! They had to write three whole gospels just to fill in Mark’s narrative gaps.

So Jesus is in the wilderness with his flock and they don’t have anything to eat. Sound familiar? We are meant to draw a comparison between Jesus and Moses. God provided manna for the Israelites in the desert and he would do it again on the green Galilean mountainside. The disciples doubted because they were focused on what humans could provide. Jesus looked to God. He knew that God would multiply what they had and provide abundantly, as he had for the Israelites. It’s appropriate that Jesus would provide bread after his teaching because God commanded that an omer of manna be placed in the Ark of the Covenant alongside the Ten Commandments (Exo. 16:34). God doesn’t just provide the law, he also provides for our physical needs.

Jesus also arranged them into groups. This seems like an insignificant detail, but there are no extraneous details in Mark. We are reminded of the way that Moses organized the Israelites into
groups in the desert. The comparison with Moses is complete. Jews would have made the connection with Deuteronomy 18:18: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their people, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him.” But of course, Jesus was greater than Moses. And the next story in chapter 6 confirms this.

After feeding the 5000, Jesus separated from the disciples for his own time of rest with God. What follows is a remarkable story. It seems like Jesus wanted to settle the question once and for all of who he was. Jesus was on the shore and the disciples were in a boat on the lake. They were “straining at the oars” against a hard wind. He went out to them, walking on the lake (Mark 6:48). Mark says, “He was about to pass by them.” This line is rich with Old Testament meaning. It recalls Job 9:8: “He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.” Jesus does what God alone can do—walk on water. But there’s more going on here than a mere performance. Job 9:11 says, “When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him.” This verse reminds us of the scene in Exodus 33:21-23 when God told Moses that he would pass by him: “When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.” In both Job and Exodus we get the idea that no one can actually see God pass by. Again in 1 Kings 19, God told Elijah to go into a cave so that he could pass by. Elijah heard God in the wind, but did not see him. So in Mark we have to pay careful attention to his wording: “He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified” (Mark 6:48-49). Mark repeats the phrase “they saw him” twice for emphasis. The disciples did what neither Moses nor Elijah could do—they saw God pass by. The cherry on top is when Jesus says, “Take Courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” “It is I” should remind us of Moses’ intimate conversation with the burning bush in Exodus 3:14 when God revealed his personal name: Yahweh, “I am who I am.” The disciples are undeniably in the presence of the living God.

Why did Jesus feel the need to make such a dramatic statement? Mark gives us the clue: “They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened” (Mark 6:51-52). We give the disciples a hard time about being thick, but we need to understand what they were dealing with. They seem to get more dense the further into Mark’s gospel we go. It’s not easy to be in the presence of God 24x7. Just look at Moses. Twice in the book of Numbers he displayed an amazing ignorance about what God was capable of. The first time occurs in Number 11 when the people were (yet again) complaining about not having meat. Moses complained to God: “Where can I get meat for all these people?...I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me” (Num. 11:13-14). When God promised to provide meat for a whole month, Moses expressed doubt: “Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, ‘I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!’ would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?” (Num. 11:21-22). That’s a pretty sassy way to speak to the Almighty God who has already brought plagues on the Egyptians, parted the Red Sea, and provided manna. We should not feel too bad about questioning what God is doing in our lives.
when Moses and the disciples, who had a front-row seat to God’s miracles, had their moments of doubt.

The second time that Moses underestimated God, he was prevented from entering the Promised Land. Instead of speaking to the rock to produce water, as God commanded him, he struck the rock with his staff in anger. Once again, he thought that he alone should provide water for the people rather than trusting in God’s provision (Num. 20:11). It is all too common that we think we are responsible for the results of our ministries, rather than depending on God’s providence. God had to take Moses and the Israelites out into the desert to teach them dependence on God. Jesus had to take the disciples out into the middle of the lake. Sometimes God has to separate us from all that's familiar in order to teach us dependence upon him. But as we have seen in this chapter, God always provides abundantly. We simply must look to him and realize that he is the same God who provided manna in the desert, fed the 5000, and walked on water. He will climb in our boat and calm the wind, for he is the great “I Am.”

Passage for Meditation

Mark 6:48-50

“Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’”

Questions for Reflection

1. These two stories are about bread and water—the two most elemental needs of the human body. Think about all the passages where Jesus refers to living bread or living water (use a Bible search tool to help you find them). What does this tell us about how God provides for us?
2. Have you ever felt God’s presence “pass by”? What were the circumstances? Did you feel comforted or afraid?

Imaginative Exercise

Make a list of all the needs that God has provided abundantly for you. Say a prayer of thanksgiving.
Day 10

Mark 7:1-23

The last encounter Jesus would have in Galilee is an argument with the Pharisees and Scribes over purity rituals. It seems like a petty charge to be bringing against Jesus and his disciples, but purity laws occupied a large part of the Jewish law. There were two sources of Jewish law in Jesus’ day: the Torah (contained in Exodus-Deuteronomy), and the Mishnah, or oral tradition. According to James Edwards, “The Mishnah was believed to preserve an unbroken chain of authorized tradition extending from Moses to the ‘Great Synagogue’ of Jesus’ day.” The Torah contained the laws from God, while the Mishnah represented humans’ attempts to interpret God’s laws and apply them in every aspect of human life. The law about washing their hands was a case where a ritual meant to purify them for worship had been taken to an unhealthy extreme. The Pharisees were fanatical about hand washing in every conceivable situation. They were afraid of any potential contact with a non-Jew or other corrupting agent. Of course, Jesus and his disciples were known to travel widely and regularly touched lepers, dead bodies, the sick, and Gentiles. No wonder the Pharisees were concerned about their state of cleanness!

There’s obviously more going on here than just a squabble over hand-washing or Mark would not have devoted 23 precious verses to it. We see in this chapter a rare moment of Mark’s inserting his voice into the narrative. The parenthetical explanation of the Jewish cleansing ritual in verses 3-4 indicates that Mark was writing for a Gentile audience. He inserted another parenthetical statement in verse 19: “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.” Food laws were a big deal in the early church; they threatened the unity of the church by dividing Jews and Gentiles. In fact, it was Peter who held the belief that all Christians must observe the Jewish purity laws until he had a vision in Acts 10. That was the moment when he realized “God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34-35). Mark was doing a little editorializing of Jesus’ comments about the purity laws to match the teaching of the early church.

Jesus had earlier castigated the Pharisees for using the Sabbath laws for their own purposes (Mark 2:27-28). Now he was doing the same with the purity laws: “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions” (Mark 7:8). He went on to use the example of the commandment to “honor your father and mother.” The practice of Corban

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allowed Jews to dedicate things of value to God after their death, but they retained use of them while they were alive. So a son could dedicate property to God, thus removing it from being used by his parents. Jesus accuses them of “nullifying” the word of God by their traditions—a very strong accusation. He uses as his proof text Isaiah 29:13: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.” God doesn’t want empty rituals, he wants our hearts. Moses used the phrase “circumcise your hearts” in Deuteronomy 10:16 to convey this idea that God wants all of us, not just what is visible from the outside. In Acts 9:51 Stephen accuses the Jews of still not understanding the spirit of God’s laws: “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: you always resist the Holy Spirit!” For this he was stoned to death.

Jesus follows his public comments with another private session with his disciples where he provides further explanation. This is when Mark inserts his comment about nullifying the food laws. Jesus certainly would not have made such a claim in front of the Pharisees. That would have hastened his demise! What Jesus wanted his disciples to understand is that faith requires what Dallas Willard calls a “renovation of the heart.” Going to church, titheing, and volunteering are all wonderful things, but they aren’t a substitute for true devotion to God. Sin and evil can still lurk in the heart of a regular church attender. Jesus makes this point: “What comes out of you is what defiles you. For from within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly” (Mark 7:20-22). These are what Paul calls “the acts of the sinful nature” (Galatians 5:19). The only true antidote to our sinful nature is the “fruit of the Spirit.” Paul says, “Against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5:23). In other words, no law can bring about a true transformation—only total devotion to Jesus Christ can change our hearts. Or as Dallas Willard puts it, “Profound transformation [in the heart] is the only thing that can definitely conquer outward evil.”

Passage for Meditation

Mark 7:8

“You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

Questions for Reflection

1. What do you think Jesus is referring to in verse 8? Can you think of an example of something Christians do today that is more about us than about God? How can we tell what is from God
2. Compare Jesus’ comments in Mark 7:20-23 with Paul’s comments in Galatians 5:19-26. What do you think Jesus and Paul are telling us about true transformation?

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Imaginative Exercise

Make a list of the “purity laws” that Christians should follow today. Think about the purpose of purity in cleansing our hearts, not just our bodies.
Twice Touched

Day 11

Mark 8:1-26

Chapter 8 is the exact middle of the book of Mark, but it’s also the climax. In this chapter Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, which signals an important shift in Jesus’ ministry. The verses leading up to Peter’s declaration are extremely important, so we need to pay close attention to what’s happening.

After his conflict with the Pharisees over observance of the purity laws, Jesus and his disciples left Galilee and traveled in Gentile territory. Jesus was well-received by the Gentiles and was able to perform healing miracles. At the beginning of chapter 8 we see a repeat of the feeding miracle, only this time it happens with a Gentile crowd that is smaller than the Jewish crowd that we saw in chapter 6. The two stories are nearly identical, with a few exceptions. The Jewish crowd numbered 5000 men, whereas the Gentile crowd numbered 4000 total. In the first story they had five loaves and two fish; in the second story they had seven loaves and “a few small fish.” In the first story the disciples brought the problem of feeding the crowd to Jesus’ attention; in the second story Jesus raised the issue himself. In the first story the disciples picked up 12 basketfuls of bread and fish after everyone had eaten their fill; in the second story they picked up seven basketfuls. In the first story the crowd had been with Jesus for one day, whereas the Gentile crowd stayed with him for three days. In both stories Jesus had deep compassion for the people and performed a miracle of multiplication. Most importantly, in both cases the disciples were eyewitnesses to Jesus’ miraculous provision.

Mark follows the feeding of the 4000 with a brief encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees where they asked him for a sign from heaven. Exasperated, Jesus replied, “Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it” (Mark 8:12). It’s ironic that the Pharisees would ask for a sign from God right after Jesus fed 4000 people with seven loaves of bread! The signs have been there all along, but they do not recognize them, or refuse to see them. In John’s gospel the disciple Thomas refused to believe in Jesus’ resurrection until he had verifiable proof. Jesus appeared to him and told him to put his finger where the nails had been. Thomas declared he is Christ, but Jesus told him, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). How can we reduce the mystery of God to a single sign? How can we measure grace empirically?
Then they jumped in a boat to cross the lake. Have you noticed that in Mark’s gospel many of Jesus’ most significant conversations with his disciples happened in a boat? It was probably one of the few places where they could be alone and he could convey private information to them. I think it was also their version of the wilderness where they had to depend entirely on Jesus.

That’s what makes what happens next so ironic. They realize that they only have one loaf of bread among them. Didn’t they just witness Jesus multiply seven loaves of bread to feed 4000 people? And didn’t they witness him do the same thing for more than 5000 people? What would it take before they got that he was the Great Provider? Jesus asked it this way: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts not hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?” (Mark 8:17-18). Then he gave them a pop quiz about the two feeding miracles which they had witnessed. Again, Mark’s questions are meant to be rhetorical since the answers are self-evident.

It was important that the disciples understood who Jesus was and the message he came to proclaim. He had handpicked these guys, had shared his authority with them, and had shared secret knowledge of God’s kingdom with them. But he also knew that it would take time for them to truly understand the significance of his mission. I think Jesus realized that these 12 men were in the advanced class and were on an accelerated track. The future of the church depended on their passing the final exam. Maybe that’s why Jesus repeated the feeding miracle—to give them one more chance to see.

The next story illustrates this very point. At Bethsaida a blind man was brought to Jesus for healing. At first Jesus spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him. Then he asked, “Do you see anything?” The man replied that he saw only shapes. So Jesus touched him a second time. Then he could see perfectly. This is the only miracle that Jesus had to perform twice before it took. Matthew and Luke did not include it, probably for that reason. But Mark uses it here to make a point about revelation. Some people can see and understand instantly, but some people need a second touch by the healer. The disciples were beginning to see the truth, but they needed prolonged exposure and proximity to Jesus before they would see clearly. We all need to be close to Christ, even if (or especially if) we don’t yet fully understand who he is.

Throughout the gospels, physical blindness is used as a metaphor for spiritual blindness. Just having eyes doesn’t mean we can truly see. Only through faith can we see clearly. “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

Passage for Meditation

Mark 8:25

“Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.”

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Questions for Reflection

1. The process of sanctification (growing in Christlikeness) takes a lifetime. We come to know and understand the gospel in stages. What aspect of the Christian faith do you still not understand or feel comfortable with? What can you do to grow in that area?

2. What does the miracle of the twice-touched man show you about healing?

Imaginative Exercise

Is there something that God is trying to show you, but you can’t quite see it yet? Have you had “signs” that you can’t explain? Write them down, then close your eyes and imagine Jesus touching your eyes. Pray for God to reveal his truth to you.
Throughout the first half of Mark’s gospel, Jesus has been silent on the topic of his identity. Only God and the demons have identified him as the Son of God. Jesus has only used the term “Son of Man” to refer to his authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10), which would not have had messianic connotations for his audience. In fact, it seems that Jesus has gone out of his way to keep his true identity a secret. He has certainly demonstrated that he is the Son of God, but he has not proclaimed it. Now, he asks the disciples the $64,000 question: “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8:27). They answer John the Baptist, Elijah, and one of the prophets. This confirms what we read in 6:14-15 regarding the rumor mill that had gotten back to King Herod about Jesus.

Then Jesus asks a more personal question: “Who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:29). I imagine him looking right at Peter when he asked this and without even thinking Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” Peter gave the right answer but for the wrong reason. The word “messiah” was burdened with royal imagery, such as the descendant of King David prophesied in Jeremiah 23:5-6: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.’” What they got in Jesus was not the warrior-king who would restore Israel to its former glory, but the Suffering Servant who would “be killed and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). Mark says that Jesus “spoke plainly about this,” suggesting that he did not mince any words in describing his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. He wanted them to understand clearly what he was telling them (and they were known to be a bit dense). What he described was so antithetical to the messianic image that Peter had in mind that Peter actually pulled Jesus aside “to rebuke him.” What a profoundly human thing for Peter to do. He was so caught up in his own idea of who Jesus was that he wasn’t listening. Jesus rebuked him right back and accused him of being aligned with Satan in trying to prevent Jesus from fulfilling God’s ultimate purpose. How easily we can do Satan’s bidding without even knowing it. The Jews wanted a messiah who would lead a revolt against the Roman occupation and return Israel to its pre-exilic state. But if they had read the prophets carefully they would have understood that God had a bigger plan—to save the whole world, including the Gentiles. And that could only happen through sacrifice.
To make his point, Jesus “called the crowd to him along with his disciples” (Mark 8:34). This is a rare time in Mark when Jesus actually called the crowd to him rather than simply responding to the crowd. Earlier Mark told us that he and his disciples were having this conversation about his identity “on the way.” That suggests that they were traveling and the crowds may have been following close behind. In Mark’s gospel Jesus doesn’t deliver a lot of long speeches, but here he delivers a sermon on discipleship. “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). God doesn’t want triumphalism but rather commitment. In God’s kingdom the values are reversed: whoever saves their life will lose it and whoever loses their life will save it. He’s still talking in riddles! Whatever does he mean? N.T. Wright explains that Jesus was encouraging them to “abandon their crazy dreams of nationalist revolution” not because he was a defeatist but “because he saw it as, paradoxically, a way of being deeply disloyal to Israel’s God and to his purpose for Israel to be the light of the world.” In Isaiah 49:6, God said: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” There it is! God’s ultimate plan that Jesus came to fulfill. He didn’t come merely to move backwards in time to reclaim a former stage in Israel’s history; he came to advance the plan forward to save all of God’s creation. The Jews were thinking too small.

It wasn’t enough to just tell them who he was, Jesus had to show them. So he took his chosen few—Peter, James, and John—and went up a high mountain. “There he was transfigured before them His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them” (Mark 9:2-3). I’m reminded of the scene in Exodus 24 after Moses consecrated the covenant between God and Israel when Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the 70 elders went up on Mount Sinai “and saw the God of Israel” (v. 9). They basically had a party with God on his mountain. Scripture doesn’t explain why God allowed these chosen few in his presence, but I like to think it was a show of trust on God’s part. They were, after all, entering into a relationship of mutual commitment and love. In Mark 9 God once again pealed back the curtain and allowed a select few humans to glimpse the heavenly realm as a show of trust and intimacy.

Joining them were Moses and Elijah, heavenly witnesses to Jesus’ true identity. They were the most revered among the Jewish pantheon of prophets. Mark’s description of Jesus’ appearance (which we assume was an eyewitness account by Peter) is reminiscent of Moses’ appearance when he would come down the mountain after being in God’s presence. Exodus 34:29 says, “When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.” Only Moses’ face was radiant from being exposed to God’s transcendent radiance, but Jesus’ entire body became radiant. The heavenly glow came from within rather than without. Another allusion to Mount Sinai appears in the form of the glory cloud, associated with God’s presence. They heard God’s voice say: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7). Even the dense disciples couldn’t mistake the meaning of that statement! We’ve heard those words before at Jesus’ baptism, but the disciples weren’t present at the Jordan River that day. There should be no doubt in their minds that this is the Son of God. They still might not completely

understand what that means, however. In fact, Jesus told them that they were not to tell anyone what they had seen until after his resurrection (Mark 9:9). This was probably more because it wouldn’t make any sense until after they experienced his resurrection. Mark confirms this explanation with this somewhat comical aside: “They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what ‘rising from the dead’ meant” (Mark 9:10).

This was a lot for the disciples to take in. We should not judge them too severely for not completely comprehending who Jesus was, even after traveling with him for as long as they had. As Jesus repeatedly reminds them, it’s one thing to see but another thing entirely to understand what you’re seeing. They believed that Jesus performed miracles—in fact, they had performed them themselves. They believed that Jesus had rebuked demons, walked on water, and calmed the storm. But even then they asked themselves, “Who is this?” (Mark 4:41). This was Jesus’ mission and they were just along for the ride. They couldn’t be expected to understand it as fully as he did. Oswald Chambers speaks to this aspect of discipleship:

> There is an aspect of Jesus that chills even a disciple’s heart to its depth and makes his entire spiritual life gasp for air. This unusual Person with His face set ‘like a flint’ (Isaiah 50:7) is walking with great determination ahead of me, and He strikes terror right through me. He no longer seems to be my Counselor and Friend and has a point of view about which I know nothing. All I can do is stand and stare at Him in amazement. At first I was confident that I understood Him, but now I am not so sure. I begin to realize that there is a distance between Jesus and me and I can no longer be intimate with Him. I have no idea where He is going, and the goal has become strangely distant.\(^\text{20}\)

We have all felt this discomfort at one point or another in our walk with Jesus. Do we really understand who he is and what it means to follow him? Are we really prepared for what discipleship will require of us? I’m sure Jesus’ disciples had this sinking feeling that Chambers describes following this conversation, and certainly Peter, James, and John felt it as they came down the mountain. Every disciple of Jesus Christ must ask themselves this fundamental question: “Who do you say I am?”

**Passage for Meditation**

Mark 8:34-35

> “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

Questions for Reflection

1. As you read this passage, what comes to mind? What does Jesus mean that we must deny ourselves and take up our cross?
2. Have you ever experienced what Oswald Chambers describes in your walk of faith? Do you ever get discouraged? What can you do when you can’t see the road ahead?

Imaginative Exercise

How would you answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say I am?” Write out your response to this question.
Mark follows the transfiguration with a series of stories that all serve as a vehicle for Jesus to teach his disciples what it means to follow him. There are three times in the book of Mark when Jesus predicts his death and resurrection, and all three occur within chapters 8-10. The first one follows Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah (8:31). This, of course, sets up the transfiguration when Jesus’ divinity is revealed to Peter, James, and John. The next one occurs in 9:31 and the third in 10:33-34. In between these last two predictions Jesus packs a lot of teaching about what it means to be his disciple. I imagine that he knew the stakes were about to get very high and he took every opportunity to prepare them for what was about to happen.

We know this section is important because Mark rarely spends time telling us what Jesus taught. In 9:30 he tells us, “They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples.” He was done with the crowds; he needed to spend quality time with his disciples. The first lesson he taught them was about humility. He overheard them arguing about who was the greatest disciple. I wonder if this argument was triggered when Jesus left them alone and took Peter, James, and John up the mountain. We saw what happened in Exodus when Moses went up on Mount Sinai for 40 days—he came back to see the people worshipping the Golden Calf! When Jesus and his chosen disciples came down from the mountain, they found the other disciples arguing with the Scribes (9:14). They were also unable to heal the boy with the evil spirit. Jesus’ absence caused them to lose faith.

They might also have been jealous that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him. Envy can threaten unity. But Jesus settled the matter with one statement: “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” (9:35). In his letter to the Philippians, Paul instructed them to have “the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:5-8). Everything looks different in the shadow of the cross. The great become humbled and the humble are exalted. That was the central theme of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-11. With fewer words, Mark conveys the same point. Jesus was
referring to himself becoming a servant of all, but was also teaching that his disciples must humble themselves in order to have “the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had.”

Next he teaches them about compassion: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me” (9:37); “anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly be rewarded” (9:41). This last statement is important because Jesus refers to himself as the Messiah for the first time and uses a term of possession when referring to his disciples. There is a direct connection between the compassionate act and Jesus (and by extension God). We are reminded of his saying recorded in Matthew’s gospel: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). Discipleship is servanthood. But it’s not enough just to be nice to others; Jesus warned them not to cause others to sin. They are to be accountable to each other as a community of faith. He compares them with salt: “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other” (Mark 9:50). In the first century when salt was an important food preservative, the disciples would have understood the analogy. But what does salt have to do with peace?

We have to go back to Leviticus 2:13 to remind ourselves that God told the Israelites: “Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings.” Again in Numbers 18:19, God said to Aaron, the High Priest, “Whatever is set aside from the holy offerings the Israelites present to the Lord I give to you and your sons and daughters as your perpetual share. It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord for both you and your offspring.” Salt was an important part of the offering that the Israelites presented to God; it symbolized the preservation of the covenant relationship. Mark is reminding the disciples that they are to be the salt that preserves the relationship within the family of God. As his disciples, everything they do is in his name. There is no part of life that is not subsumed under the name “disciple of Christ.”

Jesus makes this point clearly in chapter 10 when he speaks with the wealthy man. The man asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus recites the Ten Commandments, which the man proudly claims to have kept all his life. But discipleship is more than just following the rules. It’s about giving all that we are for Christ. Knowing this man was wealthy, Jesus picked the one thing that meant the most to him: “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). The man walks away discouraged, but Jesus uses this as a teachable moment for his disciples. The cost of discipleship is everything that we have and everything that we are. Jesus repeats his earlier statement: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first,” suggesting that everything between 9:35 and 10:31 is connected to this point.

In the next sentence Mark tells us, “They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way” (Mark 10:32). This is an important marker in the text. Until now they had been wandering in the north around Galilee. Now they were on their way to Jerusalem, Ground Zero. Everything that happens from here on will be connected with Jesus’ passion. We were told at the beginning of chapter 10 that they were in “the region of Judea,” which means they were
getting closer to Jerusalem. That’s why Jesus’ teaching about discipleship became so intense. One final story indicates that the disciples still don’t quite understand the “first will be last, last will be first” lesson. James and John asked for the privilege of sitting at Jesus’ right and left “in your glory” (Mark 10:37). This gives Jesus his final opportunity to drive home his point about the cost of discipleship: “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:39). They answer “yes” because they are still interpreting Jesus’ words literally. So, once again, he explains that he did not come to be seated on a throne of glory, but to suffer and die “as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). In God’s kingdom those who want to lead must first sacrifice in service to the greater good.

They had never heard anything like this before. Jews had been suffering for centuries. It was their turn to triumph. This was their long-awaited time, when the Messiah had finally arrived! They would be Israel again, a united monarchy under a king like David enjoying God’s favor. But Jesus is trying to help them understand that God had another plan, a better plan. They would become the Israel that God always intended them to be when he first told Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3). When he spoke to the Hebrews from Mount Sinai and told them, “you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exo. 19:6), the point of making them a kingdom of priests was to minister to the world, to be a city on a hill. They would be Israel reconstituted as a servant nation, fulfilling their destiny. As N.T. Wright so eloquently puts it, “This was the kingdom-invitation he was issuing. This was the play for which he was holding auditions.”

Were they ready to be the leading men in God’s play, even if it had a different ending than they expected? Are we ready for a part in God’s play? What are we prepared to sacrifice in order to fulfill God’s destiny for our lives? These are the tough questions of discipleship.

Passage for Meditation

Mark 10:42-45

“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Questions for Reflection

1. What part do you think you are meant to play in God’s kingdom? Is there anything you would not do to serve God and his people?

2. What do you think Jesus meant when he said, “whoever wants to be first must be slave of all”? How do you interpret the word “slave”? Read Romans 6:16-17. Does Paul help you to understand Jesus’ meaning?

Imaginative Exercise

Find an opportunity this week to be a servant to someone. It could be an individual, or a group. Journal about your experience of servant discipleship.
Curses

Day 14

Mark 11:1-25

The first ten verses of chapter 11 are filled with Old Testament significance. Why else would Jesus come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey? He’s walked everywhere else. The Mount of Olives was associated in scripture with God’s judgment and the end times. The most striking of these prophecies is in Zechariah 14:1-4:

A day of the Lord is coming, Jerusalem, when your possessions will be plundered and divided up within your very walls. I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women ravished. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city. Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations as he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.

Zechariah also prophesied that the king of Israel would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey: “Rejoice greatly, Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech. 9:9).

Chapter 11 captures this schizophrenic mood of triumph and judgment. Jesus fulfills the prophecy and comes riding into Jerusalem on a donkey to the shouts of the adoring crowd. Mark is more subdued in his description of this “triumphal entry” than the other gospel writers. Matthew says that “a very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road” and after he had passed “the whole city was stirred and asked, ‘Who is this?’” (Matt. 21:8, 10). John depicts the crowd gathering in anticipation even before Jesus finds the donkey (John 12:12). Mark says only that “many people spread their cloaks on the road” (v. 8) and there’s no mention of the crowd’s reaction to Jesus other than shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the
Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Mark 11:9-10). The word “Hosanna” means, “Save us, we pray.” They are actually quoting from Psalm 118: “Lord, save us! Lord, grant us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (v. 25-26). What they say next is baffling: “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” James Edwards points out that the phrase “our father David” appears nowhere else in Judaism. Blind Bartimaeus had called Jesus “Son of David,” which does have messianic significance (Mark 10:47). Mark might have been trying to show how mistaken the crowd was about Jesus’ mission and identity. Or maybe he just got it wrong! It seems that the other gospel writers thought so since they all corrected Mark’s wording. In Matthew’s gospel the people shout, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” In Luke they shout, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Luke 19:38). In John’s gospel they shout, “Blessed is the king of Israel!” (John 12:13). Mark’s depiction of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is much less enthusiastic than we see in the other gospels, which matches the darker tone of this chapter.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is kind of anti-climactic since he and his disciples simply turn around and go back to Bethany for the night. This gives Mark the opportunity to build one of his narrative sandwiches. On the way back to Jerusalem the next day, Jesus sees a fig tree. Mark tells us that “Jesus was hungry” (Mark 11:12). This is an interesting detail since nowhere else in Mark are we told about any physical condition of Jesus. We see him sleep only once—in the midst of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had a need that the fig tree could not satisfy. So Jesus curses the tree: “May no one ever eat fruit from you again” (Mark 11:14). This seems rather rash for Jesus, since Mark tells us it was not fig season. James Martin et. al. explain that Jesus was expecting “preseason figs, which normally would accompany the growth of the fig tree.” What looked like a healthy tree in bloom turned out to be deceiving.

This sets up the next scene in the temple. Jesus gets angry at what he sees happening in God’s house—commerce. He quotes Isaiah 56:7: “Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations,” and Jeremiah 7:11: “Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you?” as his justification for disrupting the business being conducted. Jesus curses the temple just as he had cursed the fig tree. The temple is full and active, but it is not satisfying the spiritual needs of God or the people. He struck at the very heart of the temple industry and this stirred the chief priests and scribes to begin plotting his death. Of course, they had been thinking about this since he healed the man with the withered hand in the synagogue (Mark 3:6). Clearly, Jesus was a revolutionary who must be silenced.

As they were leaving Jerusalem that evening they passed the fig tree and saw that it had “withered from the roots” (Mark 11:20). This is the only cursing miracle in the gospels. Edwards calls it an “enacted parable” that symbolizes what will happen to the temple. In 13:2 Jesus says,

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“Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” Like the tree that is withered from the roots, the temple will be torn down because it is not fulfilling its purpose. Jesus uses the withered fig tree to teach the disciples a lesson in faith: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (Mark 11:24). This seems an odd time to be talking about prayer and faith. I would imagine that the cursed fig tree and Jesus’ rant in the temple shook up the disciples. They weren’t used to seeing him angry. But curses were a common feature in the Old Testament. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy God made it clear that there are consequences for disobedience. We serve a God who is sovereign over all things, as he reminded the Israelites in Deuteronomy 32:39: “See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand.”

Lest the disciples think Jesus is weak in the coming days, he reminds them that the God they serve is all powerful. And we have access to that power through prayer. “Have faith in God,” Jesus tells them. He also does not want to miss this opportunity to teach them the proper attitude of prayer. They had just witnessed the improper attitude of prayer and supplication in the temple. “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mark 11:25). What matters is not our outward appearance during prayer, but the purification of our heart. Matthew puts it this way: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. But when you pray, go in your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen” (Matt. 6:5-6). When we have the proper attitude of prayer, and the proper attitude of faith, then anything is possible with God.

Passage for Meditation

Mark 11:22-24

“‘Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered. ‘Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will happen, it will be done for you. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you believe that anything is possible through prayer? What does Jesus say is the proper attitude of prayer? What is your attitude toward prayer?
2. What is the purpose of the church? If Jesus were to return today and visit your church, what do you think he would say?

Imaginative Exercise

Write an eye-witness account of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. What would the typical person have thought about that event? Why would they be praising Jesus?
The Tenants of the Vineyard

Day 15

Mark 11:27-12:44

After stirring up the hornet’s nest in the temple, Jesus has a series of encounters with the hornets—the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes, who made up the Sanhedrin. The first encounter sets the tone for all the others; representatives from the Sanhedrin came to Jesus in the temple (all of the encounters in these 2 chapters happened in the temple) and asked him, “By what authority are you doing these things?” (Mark 11:28). If we go back to the beginning of Mark’s gospel the topic of authority was prominent. The first time that Jesus preached in a synagogue they noticed that “he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law” (Mark 1:22). Immediately following this observation an evil spirit recognized Jesus and says, “I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (Mark 1:24). The evil spirit answered the question on everyone’s mind—“who is this man who speaks with authority.” The word “authority” shares a root with the word “author,” one who creates. The authority that those early crowds, and the demons, recognized was the power of the creator, not just the teacher. This was the basis of Jesus’ question back to the Sanhedrin: “John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin?” (Mark 11:30). They were stuck. Clearly, God had spoken at Jesus’ baptism and declared him to be the beloved Son of God. But just as convincing was the common belief that John the Baptist was the one prophesied by Isaiah to prepare the way of the Lord (the first line of Mark’s gospel). To say that John had no divine authority to baptize would put them at odds with the majority opinion. They did what any good politician would do—they equivocated. Jesus avoided their theological trap.

But he came back at them with a devastating blow. He told the story of the owner of a vineyard who left his land in the care of tenant farmers. Every servant that he sent to collect the fruit of the vineyard was beaten or killed. Then the owner sent his own son, “whom he loved” (Mark 12:6). But they killed him as well. Then Jesus switches into the future tense to finish the story: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others” (Mark 12:9). The parable is an allusion to Isaiah 5:1-7 where Isaiah uses the vineyard as a metaphor for Israel (Judah, actually) with God being the owner. In Isaiah God put the blame on Israel for yielding bad fruit; Jesus clearly blames the tenants of the vineyard—the Jewish leadership. In Isaiah God threatened to destroy the vineyard (Isa 5:5-6); in Jesus’ parable, God will kill the tenants and replace them with others. Then he quotes Psalm 118:22-23: “The
stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” The implication is that Jesus is the cornerstone of “the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter” (Psalm 118:20).

This all must have sounded very strange to them. Who is the son in the story and why would they kill him (there’s no son figure in Isaiah’s prophecy)? Who is the cornerstone and why is it marvelous? Jesus told his disciples that he spoke in parables to those outside of their circle “so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding”’ (Mark 4:11-12). That was certainly the case with the Sanhedrin. The irony of the situation was that these were the men who supposedly knew more about scripture than anyone! The scribes were the authorities on the Torah. But time and time again Jesus revealed their ignorance about the true meaning of scripture. The next few stories drive this point home.

Apparently, they decided to split up and attack Jesus as individual groups rather than a whole body. First they sent the Pharisees and Herodians. Their main concern was political power, so they tried to trap Jesus with a political question: “Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?” (Mark 12:14). If he said no then he could be branded as a rebel; if he said yes then he would be branded as a disloyal Jew. But he sidestepped the question by saying it’s not an either or situation. Earthly governments and God’s rule are two different things. We are citizens of both, but we should put God above human government. Paul addresses this issue in Romans 13:1: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” He goes on to say: “Give to everyone what you owe: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (Rom. 13:7). Paul’s statement echoes what Jesus said: “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mark 12:17).

Then the Sadducees tried to trap Jesus on a question regarding the resurrection (which they did not believe in). If the same woman marries seven brothers, whose wife is she in the resurrection? They thought they were tricking Jesus into saying that there is no resurrection. Jesus’ retort to them was scathing: “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?” (Mark 12:24). Ouch! He accuses them of not understanding scripture or God (standing in the temple, no less). Their question is based on a faulty assumption: that the resurrection is merely an extension of our earthly life. Jesus points out that the heavenly realm is altogether different from the earthly realm, “they will be like angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). But he doesn’t leave it there; he asks about the scene in Exodus when God tells Moses that he is the “God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” If there is no afterlife, then those three men are dead, so God’s covenant with them is meaningless. “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Mark 12:27).

The third encounter was with a scribe, who asked Jesus which is the most important commandment. Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18: Love God with our whole being and love others as we love ourselves. The scribe agrees with him, which is a rare moment of reconciliation between Jesus and a Jewish leader. This exchange was different for two
reasons: 1) the scribe had listened to Jesus’ earlier debate with the Sadducees and recognized that “Jesus had given them a good answer” (Mark 12:28), and 2) he was one individual rather than a group. He clearly had no agenda other than to hear the truth, and he recognized it when he heard it. That is the beginning of discipleship, when we have ears to hear. “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34).

The difference between a group and an individual is also placed in stark contrast at the end of chapter 12 when Jesus notices a poor widow putting two small copper coins into the temple treasury. He singles her out as an example of sacrificial giving; she gave all that she had to God. Next to the showy scribes in their flowing robes and the rich men throwing in their large amounts, this woman’s sacrifice would go unnoticed by those around her but is noticed by God. God sees what’s in our hearts and knows our motivation. Faith is not a show to earn respect or praise; it’s humbling ourselves before God and trusting him with everything we have. This woman’s simple witness caps off a chapter of stories about putting human ambition and pride before God. The last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Passage for Meditation

Mark 12:43-44

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

Questions for Reflection

1. Compare the wealthy man who walked away because he would not sell everything he owns to follow Jesus and the poor widow who put everything she had into the temple treasury. Which of these two is the better disciple? Do you think Jesus is saying that God wants us to be poor?

2. Why do you think Jesus is harder on the Jewish leaders than on the average person? Should leaders be held to a higher standard?

Imaginative Exercise

Rewrite the parable of the tenants for today. What would Jesus use instead of a vineyard? Who would be the tenants?
Day 16

Mark 13:1-35

My husband used to work at an Environmental Center in Osceola County. He told me something interesting about the scrub pine: the cone of the scrub pine will not propagate unless it encounters fire. When the cone bursts in the heat, the seeds are spread. It’s one of nature’s axioms that in order for something to grow, something else has to die. This reminds me of Jesus’ words in John 12:24: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” It’s difficult for us to accept this principle when it involves the death of something that is meaningful to us. I think that’s the lesson that Jesus is teaching the disciples in chapter 13. Transitions in history usually involve destruction.

Mark makes it clear in the first verse that Jesus “was leaving the temple” for the last time. When one of the disciples commented on the grandeur of the building, Jesus predicted its destruction. This sets up the long discourse in this chapter on the destruction of the temple that will signal not the end of times, but the end of one era and the beginning of another. It also serves to prepare the disciples for the destruction of Jesus’ earthly body in order to be resurrected into new life.

Mark is anything but subtle! In verse 3 he tells us that “Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple.” As we considered earlier, the Mount of Olives was prophesied to be the site of God’s ultimate judgment and destruction of Jerusalem in Zechariah 14:4. Peter, James, John, and Andrew (the original disciples) asked him about the timing of when “these things will happen.” We’re not sure what they were referring to specifically, but we can infer from the context they were referring to the end times (“they are all about to be fulfilled”). It’s significant that Jesus’ response to their question begins and ends with the word “Watch” (13:5, 13:37). He tells them that destruction is part of the plan: “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come” (Mark 13:7). He describes devastating events as “birth pains,” a natural part of the process of creation. I’m reminded of Paul’s description in Romans 8:22: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” Pain accompanies birth in the natural world. Rather than fear it, we should anticipate what it portends.
Even though the destruction to come is part of God’s plan, Jesus tells them to be on guard against false messiahs (13:5) and false accusations (13:9). Suffering is part of discipleship. Jesus told them this in Mark 8:34: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” In chapter 13 he paints a vivid picture of what this might look like. “Everyone will hate you because of me, but those who stand firm to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:13). Relationships will be strained or destroyed; families will be torn apart. But through it all, the Holy Spirit will be with them (Mark 13:11).

Much has been written about the “abomination that causes desolation” (also translated as “desolating sacrilege”) that Mark refers to in verse 14. This phrase comes from Daniel 9:27, referring to the destruction of the temple: “And at the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.” While Mark is vague about the exact circumstances of the abomination, Matthew 24:15 and Luke 21:20 both suggest that it refers to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Roman emperor Vespasian and his son, Titus. 24 This means that Mark’s gospel was written prior to 70. It’s clear that Jesus was predicting the destruction of the temple, not the apocalypse. That’s what makes verses 26-27 puzzling. The image of “the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory” comes right out of Daniel 7:13-14. This image combined with Jesus’ statement, “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (13:30) explain why the early church believed that Jesus would return in their lifetime. But he also said, “about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (v. 32). The only thing we can do is “watch” and keep faith.

The apocalyptic imagery of chapter 13 baffles us, as it must have baffled Jesus’ disciples. He chose to only reveal it to his closest disciples, the same ones who witnessed his transfiguration (except Andrew). This was dangerous knowledge. But the point Jesus makes is this: it’s not important that we know when, where, and why these things will happen. The important thing is to keep the faith and believe that God will be victorious. Jews could not imagine anything worse than the destruction of the temple. It was the center of their religious world and sense of identity. But Jesus had been preparing them since he arrived in Jerusalem for the eventual destruction of the temple because it had become corrupted. Jesus would say, “I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands” (Mark 14:58). Jesus himself was the new temple. John confirmed this in Revelation: “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev. 21:22). God is greater than buildings and greater than death. As the Creator, he will always bring new life out of destruction.

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24 The Great Revolt of AD 66 led ultimately to the destruction of the temple by the Roman army in AD 70. Ironically, infighting among the Jews in Jerusalem contributed to their defeat, recalling Jesus’ words that “brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child” (Mark 13: 12).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Jewish%E2%80%93Roman_War
Passage for Meditation

Mark 13:2

“‘Do you see these great buildings?’ replied Jesus. ‘Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.’

Questions for Reflection

1. Think about the great ruins of former civilizations. How do they help us understand what Jesus is saying about the temple? Does the church ascribe too much meaning to buildings?
2. We’ve heard many groups try to predict the end of the world using scripture. What would Jesus say to these people? What is your interpretation of what Jesus is saying about what will happen in the end times?

Imaginative Exercise

Read the poem “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelley:
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/guide/238972#poem. What does this tell you about what lasts and what does not? Write a letter to the church explaining the importance of being watchful and where we are in danger of falling asleep.
The Cup of Suffering

Day 17

Mark 14:1-42

Everything in the book of Mark has been building to this point. In rapid succession, Mark moves from one incredible scene to the next in this action-packed chapter. Chapter 14 opens with the Sanhedrin (“the chief priests and the teachers of the law”) plotting to arrest and kill Jesus. Their dilemma was that Passover was the busiest time of year in Jerusalem. The city was busting at the seams with people, so it would be difficult to do anything unnoticed. They were afraid of a riot! That attests to Jesus’ popularity, but also explains why they chose a garden at night for his arrest.

The story of the woman with the alabaster jar is another witness to Jesus’ popularity. Jesus and the disciples were eating at the home of Simon the Leper (we assume he was a former leper), when a woman crashed their party. This was a bold move for her—as bold as the bleeding woman in chapter 5 pushing her way through the crowd to touch Jesus’ cloak. She had a jar of expensive perfume, which she broke open and poured on Jesus’ head. What an audacious offering! She didn’t just pour a little of the perfume on his head, she broke the jar and poured it all on Jesus. She gave sacrificially, like the poor widow in chapter 12 who “put in everything” (v. 44). No explanation is given as to why she felt compelled to do this. Luke described her as “A woman in that town who lived a sinful life” (Luke 7:37). Church tradition tells us that it was Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus had cured of demon-possession. I like the fact that Mark leaves her anonymous and her motives unknown. She becomes a model of the true disciple. We are all called to give everything to Jesus. In Leviticus chapter 1 we learn that the burnt offering is the only one in which the entire animal is put on the fire and totally consumed by God to atone for the sin of the individual. This woman’s total sacrifice of her expensive perfume presages Jesus’ total sacrifice of himself for the atonement of sins. Jesus said, “She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial” (Mark 14:8).

Mark quickly cuts to the scene with Judas promising to betray Jesus for money. No explanation is given for why he would betray his Master. In fact, betrayal is a theme throughout this chapter. Jesus predicts that by the end of the night, all the disciples will have betrayed him: “You will all fall way” (Mark 14:27). Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7: “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” Zechariah goes on to predict the destruction of his people, save one-third, who will be refined by fire (Zech. 13:9). This is an apt description of what happens to the disciples and apostles in the early church. Betrayal and suffering were prophesied as part of God’s redemptive
It’s significant that even though Jesus knows the disciples will all betray him, he’s willing to sacrifice himself anyway. This is an act of grace and mercy, not a privilege earned by the disciples for their loyalty. Peter argues with Jesus that he will not betray him, but Jesus says, “you yourself will disown me three times” (Mark 14:30). I’m reminded of God’s words to Moses in Deuteronomy 31:20: “When I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, the land I promised on oath to their ancestors, and when they eat their fill and thrive, they will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking my covenant.” Even though he knew the Israelites would disobey him and break the covenant, God still led them to the Promised Land. He fulfilled his promise even though the people did not deserve it and would surely disobey his commandments. We see this scene re-enacted in Mark, when Jesus foretells the disciples’ betrayal even as he prepares to die for their sins.

Echoes of the exodus are strongest in the upper room where Jesus and his followers observe Passover together. It is a truly astounding scene when Jesus transforms right before their eyes into the sacrificial lamb. He prefaces his comments by saying, “The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him” (Mark 14:21). I’m sure the disciples were wondering which scripture he was referring to. The “Son of Man” title suggests the passage in Daniel 7 when “one like a son of man” comes in the clouds, approaches the Ancient of Days, and is given “authority, glory, and power” (vv. 13-14). Most likely, Jesus was referring to Isaiah 53: “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter….Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities” (vv. 7, 10-11). In one moment, Jesus redefines the Messiah not as a superhero, but as both High Priest and sacrifice rolled into one. The author of Hebrews says, “But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:11-12). Jesus put it this way: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:24). His disciples would have recognized the words of Moses in Exodus 24:8: “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” The lamb’s blood has been replaced by Jesus’ blood. The sacrifice that had to be repeated in the temple would be made once-for-all through the temple of Christ’s body. In his gospel John indicated this through Jesus’ final words: “It is finished” (John 19:30). God’s plan to redeem his people was fulfilled.

The theme of betrayal continued in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus asked them to stay awake while he prayed alone. His words, “Stay here and keep watch” remind us of his words in chapter 13 regarding the coming desolation: “Be on guard! Be alert!” (v. 33), “Watch!” (v. 37). Their human weakness prevented them from staying awake. It’s not clear why Jesus wanted them to stay awake. He certainly knew that he would be betrayed that night, but I doubt the disciples
could have prevented it. I think Jesus was teaching them a final lesson about staying alert against the evil forces in the world that would threaten the church. It’s easy to become complacent or even apathetic. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men encountered a race called the Lotus-eaters who fed on the lotus plant. When the men ate the plant, it left them apathetic and no longer caring about their journey home. In Revelation 3, Jesus warned the church in Laodicea about becoming apathetic: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (vv. 15-16). We can betray Jesus in many ways, including not doing anything at all. We see this type of betrayal when all the disciples deserted Jesus during his arrest (Mark 13:50). Judas actively betrayed Jesus, but the rest of the disciples betrayed him through inaction.

Jesus is alone before everyone deserts him. We see this during the heart-wrenching scene when he prays for God to “Take this cup from me” (Mark 13:36). Even though he took Peter, James and John—his closes confidantes—with him, we see that he is alone in his suffering. This is a very human moment when Jesus is “deeply distressed and troubled” (v. 33). Only Mark shows Jesus referring to God as “Abba, Father” (v. 36). This gives the scene a sense of familial intimacy—it’s Isaac pleading with Abraham not to sacrifice him on the altar, but knowing that no ram will magically appear to save him. The cup of suffering, which he shared with his disciples during the Passover meal, is now his alone. He becomes the sacrificial lamb who is about to be led to the slaughter. His appointed time, “the hour,” had come.

**Passage for Meditation**

Mark 14:24-25

“‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,’ he said to them. ‘Truly I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. Read Exodus 24:5-8 and compare it with Mark 14:22-24. How are the two scenes similar? How are they different?
2. Have you ever experienced an agony similar to what Jesus experiences in the Garden of Gethsemane? Have you ever pleaded with God for something to happen, or not to happen? What can we learn from Jesus’ attitude about facing suffering?

**Imaginative Exercise**

Write about the Last Supper from the perspective of one of the disciples (for example, Peter who would later deny Christ, Judas who would betray Christ). What do you imagine they were thinking as Jesus ratified a new covenant using Moses’ words?
Since chapter 10, Jesus has been walking purposely toward his death. His sense of mission and determination can be heard in Mark’s description: “They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.” What caused Jesus’ followers to be “astonished” and “afraid”? I imagine it was his steely resolve to fulfill the mission for which he came. Jerusalem would be the site of his suffering and death. He had been preparing his disciples for this since chapter 8 when his true identity as the Messiah was revealed. Even if they did not understand that their journey would end in Jesus’ death at the hands of the Jewish and Roman authorities, they could tell that Jesus knew. It’s no wonder Oswald Chambers calls this the “discipline of dismay.”

Dismayed is a good description of how the disciples must have felt when Jesus was arrested. It’s interesting how Mark describes the force that was sent to arrest him as “a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders” (Mark 14:43). Matthew embellished a bit, calling it “a large crowd” (Matt. 26:47). Only John identifies them as “a detachment of soldiers” (John 18:3). Jesus was arrested by his fellow Jews, loyal to the Sanhedrin. What a contrast to the “many people” who spread their cloaks on the road and shouted “Hosanna!” as Jesus rode into Jerusalem (Mark 11:8). Perhaps that is why Mark was more subdued in his description of the earlier scene than the later gospel writers. The crowd was a fickle force that could quickly shift its allegiances. Judas’ kiss symbolizes this false affection.

Jesus points out the irony of the fact that they have come with clubs and swords to arrest him, when he has given them no indication that he is a Zealot who intends to lead a revolution. Once again we see that the crowd has not understood Jesus’ message about his true mission or God’s kingdom. Some scholars have suggested that Judas was a Zealot who betrayed Jesus in order to instigate a revolt. If that is true, then Judas seriously misunderstood who Jesus was. But as discussed earlier, all the disciples abandoned him, even Peter who swore his undying allegiance. There has been much speculation about the identity of the “young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment” who “fled naked, leaving his garment behind” (Mark 14:51). As James Edwards points out, there is not enough evidence in the text to identify who the young man was, but this

25 Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest, March 15.
figure provides an intriguing connection with the prophecy of Amos that “even the bravest warrior will flee naked on that day” (2:16). Edwards suggests that perhaps “his lack of identity also invites his readers to examine their own readiness to abandon Jesus.”

Mark’s description of the interrogation of Jesus by the Sanhedrin suggests that it was hasty and filled with “false testimony” (Mark 14:56-57). This false testimony and lack of witnesses flies in the face of the system of justice that God commanded of the Israelites. They have broken the ninth commandment against giving false testimony (Exo. 20:16). In Deuteronomy Moses warned the Israelites: “Do not pervert justice or show partiality…Follow justice and justice alone” (Deut. 16:18, 20). Before someone could be sentenced to death they needed two or three witnesses (Deut. 17:6). When Jesus affirmed that he was the Son of God (“I am” would also suggest he was God himself!), the high priest “tore his clothes” and ended the hearing: “Why do we need any more witnesses?” (Mark 14:63). Obviously, they were trying to short-cut due process and expedite Jesus’ death. Of course, in Roman occupied Jerusalem the Sanhedrin did not have the political authority to execute anyone. But they could recommend death to the Roman officials based on Jewish law.

Ironically, perversion of God’s justice is one of the reasons that Israel ended up in exile. The prophet Micah lists the offenses of the Jewish leaders against God: “Hear this, you leaders of the house of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel, who despise justice and distort all that is right…. Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money….Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets” (Micah 3:9-12). This is what Jesus railed against in the temple and why he predicted the destruction of the temple. God had already promised that he would punish the leaders for perverting his justice and his house of worship.

Notice that the Sanhedrin asked Jesus if he was the “Messiah,” while Pilate asked him if he was “king of the Jews.” The Romans were much more concerned about the political implications of Jesus’ claims than their theological implications. Jesus affirmed that he was the “Son of the Blessed One” but distanced himself from the title “king of the Jews.” As we’ve seen throughout the gospel of Mark, Jesus never claimed to be the king that the Jews were expecting. He referred to himself as the Son of Man to avoid messianic associations. Jesus’ silence in the face of all the accusations against him was consistent with his veil of silence throughout Mark’s gospel. God’s kingdom is hidden to those who do not have eyes to see or ears to hear. And the Sanhedrin and Pilate definitely fall into that category. It’s clear that nothing Jesus could say would sway them; their minds were made up. When Pilate offered the crowd the choice of releasing Jesus or Barabbas, the chief priests incite the crowd to choose Barabbas. Again, they violated Jewish law by not offering a crime punishable by death (Mark 15:14). They lived up to all the charges that Jesus had brought against them. The Jewish leaders were on trial in God’s court and found guilty. He had announced publicly that “These men (the teachers of the law)
will be punished most severely” (Mark 12:40). During the hearing before the Sanhedrin Jesus as much as admits that he will judge them: “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). This is what likely got him crucified on charges of blasphemy.

**Passage for Meditation**

Mark 14:72

“Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.’ And he broke down and wept.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. Why do you think Jesus remained silent during his interrogation? Is there a power in his silence?
2. Re-read Peter’s denial of Jesus. Compare it to Jesus’ hearing before the Sanhedrin. What do you think Mark is trying to show us by putting those two “trials” back-to-back? Have you ever denied Christ?

**Imaginative Exercise**

Make a list of all the ways that you have denied Christ. Say a prayer of confession.
The Curtain Is Torn

Day 19

Mark 15:16-16:20

The humiliation of Jesus at the hands of the Roman soldiers that is so difficult for us to read in chapters 15 and 16 is rich with theological significance. These verses are filled with references to the psalms and Isaiah that describe the Suffering Servant. What was meant as mockery was actually fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus most certainly knew what would happen to him. He told his disciples as much: “the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise” (Mark 10:33-34). Twice in Jerusalem he accurately predicted events: 1) when he instructed his disciples where to fine the donkey he would ride into Jerusalem (Mark 11:2), and 2) when he sent two disciples into Jerusalem and told them to find a man carrying a jar of water who would lead them to the room where they would observe the Passover (Mark 14:13-15). These two incidents show us (and his disciples) that Jesus was in control and events were playing out exactly as they were supposed to. I’m sure that was little comfort to them when they saw Jesus hanging from the cross, beaten and bloody. Here are some of the Old Testament passages that shed light on Jesus’ treatment during this passion:

“I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.” (Isaiah 50:6-7)

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5)

“I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they shake their heads. Help me, Lord my God; save
me according to your unfailing love. Let them know that it is your hand, that you, Lord, have done it. While they curse, may you bless; may those who attack me be put to shame, but may your servant rejoice.” (Psalm 109:25-28)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?....But I am a worm, not a human being; I am scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. ‘He trusts in the Lord,’ they say, ‘let the Lord rescue him, since he delights in him.’...Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people star and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” (Psalm 22:1, 6-8, 16-18)

“You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed; all my enemies are before you....They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.” (Psalm 69:19,21)

The one I find most interesting is their taunt that if he is the king of the Jews, let him save himself. They ask him to perform one final miracle: “Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:32). This reminds of the temptation of Satan as recorded in Matthew’s gospel: “’If you are the Son of God,’ he said, ‘throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone’” (Matt. 4:6). Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matt. 4:7). What they didn’t understand was that the true miracle would occur at the moment of his death. That’s when he would truly demonstrate the power of God.

There were three signs that Jesus’ death was divinely appointed. The first came when darkness fell at noon and lasted until Jesus’ death at three. It reminds me of the darkness that God caused to fall over Egypt during the plagues. The author of Exodus described it as “darkness that can be felt” (Exo. 10:21). This was a deep darkness that could only come by extinguishing all hope. They could not see to move. When Jesus breathed his last breath, “The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mark 15:38). This was the second sign. The image of the temple curtain being torn should remind us of what happened at Jesus’ baptism: “he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove” (Mark 1:10). Jesus’ baptism and his death opened a portal between earth and heaven. The tearing of the curtain signified access to the Holy of Holies through the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus for the atonement of sins. The author of Hebrews explains it this way: “Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened
for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:19-22).

The third sign was the confession of the Roman Centurion: “Surely this man was the Son of God!” What the Jews and the Romans spoke in mockery, this man speaks in truth. The gospel of Mark opens with Jesus’ identity being revealed by a demon (Mark 1:24) and closes with his identity being proclaimed by a Gentile. The faith of the Centurion is followed by the witness of Joseph of Arimathea, a “prominent” member of the Sanhedrin “who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43). Joseph “went boldly” to Pilate to request Jesus’ body for burial.

The faith of these two men, who were on the outside of Jesus’ loyal circle, stands in stark contrast with the reaction of Jesus’ disciples. The only ones around at his death and burial were the women. When they went to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body after the Sabbath, they found the stone rolled away and “a young man dressed in a white robe” sitting where Jesus’ body should be. Only Matthew identifies him as an angel, though that is certainly the implication here. The man announces to them that Jesus has risen and gone before them to Galilee. It makes sense that Jesus would appear to them in Galilee since that was the place where his gospel message was well received. But Mark says, “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).

This is the end of the original manuscript; most scholars believe that verses 9-20 were added later. Mark 16:8 would have been as unsatisfying to the early church as it is to us. But knowing Mark’s style, I believe that he wanted to leave his readers with the raw emotion of that moment. The meaning of the empty tomb had not yet sunk in. They were frightened because the story did not end as they had expected it would. We always want the Hollywood ending, when everything is wrapped up nicely and good triumphs over evil. In fact, it was not an ending, but a beginning. N.T. Wright points out that “the reason the early Christians were so joyful was because they knew themselves to be living not so much in the last days, though that was true too, as in the first days—the opening days of God’s new creation.” But something has to be destroyed in order for something to be created, and the disciples were living in the messiness of the in-between.

We want the gospel to be clean and sterile, but it’s messy. That’s what I get from reading Mark’s gospel—the grittiness of discipleship. We get it wrong most of the time. Even after Jesus appeared to some of the disciples following his resurrection, Mark says, “They did not believe them either” (Mark 16:14). When he appeared to all the disciples, he rebuked them for their lack of faith. But God was still able to work through them as they preached the gospel. There is much that we do not understand about Jesus and must take on faith. All that we really know, and must confess daily, is that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Summary

Reading Mark is like getting a primer on the gospel. He boils everything down to its most fundamental elements and presents it in a straight-forward, no frills style. Matthew and Luke built on top of the foundation Mark had laid, fleshing out Mark’s skeletal account of Jesus’ life, ministry, and passion. Some theologians and scholars over the centuries have considered Mark to be too basic and simple to have any real theological meaning. I have come to appreciate Mark’s craftsmanship as a writer and his theological perspective. He knew his audience well. I imagine that he was writing under duress; his mentor, Peter, had just been crucified by Nero who was persecuting Christians in unspeakable ways. Mark wrote quickly and with purpose: he had to provide hope and consolation to the early church. Why were they suffering? When would Jesus return as he had promised? What was the “good news” anyway? Let’s consider what Mark’s answer was to these life-and-death questions.

- **The kingdom of heaven is here.** Jesus’ first words in Mark are, “The time has come...The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” Jesus came to inaugurate a new beginning for God’s people, to return Israel from exile and lead them to the Promised Land. This was the Second Exodus, a chance to get it right. He had not forgotten them; his Spirit had come down. During his baptism heaven was “torn open” and at his death the temple of the curtain was “torn in two.” He came to give God’s people unprecedented access to the Holy of Holies. But tearing requires destruction, and every birth is accompanied by pain. Suffering and sacrifice are a necessary part of the creative process, of creating new wineskins.

- **Salvation includes the Gentiles.** Mark was clearly writing for a Gentile audience. He makes it clear that Jesus came to reconstitute Israel not to restore the former monarchy, but to fulfill Israel’s true mission to save the world. Some of Jesus’ most successful missions were in Gentile territory. The first person to proclaim him to be the Son of God was a Roman Centurion. The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem was part of God’s plan to spread the gospel beyond Judea. At the end of Mark’s gospel he tells us, “Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere” (Mark 16:20). There were no boundaries or borders in God’s kingdom.

- **Jesus was the promised savior from scripture, with a twist.** Even though Mark may have been a Gentile writing for Gentiles, he was familiar with Jewish scripture. He makes a convincing case that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Beginning with John the Baptist, Mark primarily uses references to Isaiah to show that events in Jesus’ life and ministry happened according to prophecy. He is depicted as the Good Shepherd, the Son of David, and the Son of Man. But Mark also draws strong comparisons between Jesus and Moses, suggesting that Jesus came to complete the exodus from slavery into freedom. He also alludes to the Suffering Servant in Isaiah and Jesus as the sacrificial lamb that died for the sins of the world. He clarifies God’s intent to send his own son to save the world rather than another prophet or king. He came to proclaim the in-breaking kingdom of God. He was not a politician; he was a game changer. But he did
not come to change God’s law, but to restore it to its original purpose. He came to restore Israel to its original purpose as a holy nation that would be a light to the world.

- **Jesus was the Son of God who had authority over creation and evil.** Jesus’ coming was not just a victory for Israel—it was a cosmic victory over the forces of evil. Mark makes it very clear throughout his gospel that Jesus was the Son of God. In the first chapter this is proclaimed by God himself and a demon. Through his healing miracles Jesus showed that he had power over nature. Through his teaching he proved that he had a deeper understanding of God’s law than the most knowledgeable Scribe or the most punctilious Pharisee. But he went beyond just teaching, preaching and healing. He displayed power over nature by calming the storm and power over Satan by casting out demons. Time and again, Mark demonstrates that Jesus is divine. He is in control of events, even his own death. There is no force in this world—human or evil—that is more powerful than Christ. He declared ultimate victory on the cross so that we can have everlasting salvation. No matter how bloody the battle gets we should remember that Jesus already won.

- **Discipleship is hard.** The disciples don’t come off looking very good in Mark’s gospel. They seemed to get more dense as time passed, no matter what they witnessed or what secret knowledge Jesus shared with them. Rather than judge them, we are meant to relate to them. They were just ordinary working men when Jesus called them. They weren’t seminary students who had studied theology. They left their homes and families to follow Jesus. They encountered tremendous conflict and scorn. Mark shows us through the disciples that discipleship is not easy. When we choose to follow Christ he doesn’t promise us a cushy ride. He told them there was a high cost to discipleship; they would be humbled and suffer. But to their credit, they stayed with him right until the end. Sometimes discipleship means following Jesus even when you’re not sure why or where he’s leading you. He will calm the storms and he will defeat the demons. We must choose faith over fear and recommit to following him every day.