

THE GOSPEL OF
MARK

PART II

The bottom half of the image features a large, abstract graphic composed of two overlapping semi-circles. The left semi-circle is a vibrant orange, and the right semi-circle is a bright yellow. They overlap in the center, creating a dark red, teardrop-shaped area at the bottom. The background of the entire image is a solid, deep red color.



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NEGEV DESERT, ISRAEL



INTRODUCTION

Following the King, Participating in the Kingdom

In his article, "What's the Definition of a Great Book?", Rick Gekoski writes, "what you find in the greatest works of literature often involves some or all of the following: the high quality of the language, complexity of theme and detail, universality, depth and quality of feeling, memorableness, rereadability . . . When you read works of this quality you often feel, and continue to feel, that your internal planes have shifted, and that things will never, quite, be the same again."¹

Using this definition, the Gospel of Mark can be categorized as exceptional literature. The author of Mark paints a picture of a nearly mysterious teacher, Jesus Christ, who traipses throughout the region of Jerusalem with a ragtag gaggle of staunchly loyal yet decidedly confused disciples. His bold claims of authority quickly garner opposition from the local religious authorities, while also captivating large groups of locals who flock to hear teaching and see healings and miracles performed.

Ultimately this fickle crowd falls sway to the religious authorities' rabble-rousing and join in demanding Jesus' gruesome death. Yet death is not the ending for Jesus, whose resurrection three days later confirms his divine identity and gives hope for all who believe in him.

This is good literature.²

In addition to being good literature, the Gospel of Mark also falls under the genre of ancient biography. While the author of Mark carefully crafts a story in his gospel, he is also documenting historical events which happened in the life of a historical person, Jesus. While the genre of ancient biography differs slightly from modern biography, the ancient biography is still committed to “preserving accurate portraits of their main character.”³ The author of Mark tells not “a perspective of what the disciples had come to appreciate about Jesus by looking back and reflecting on what he did,” but rather documents a historical account of Jesus and his earthly ministry which then prompt and invite readers into reflection and engagement.⁴

Using methods of story, history, and biography, the author of Mark reveals to his readers the content of his message: the nature of Jesus’ identity and his Messiahship. Through this story and message, the author of Mark invites his readers to respond to the call of discipleship. So, as Gekoski writes, the reader “will never, quite, be the same again.”⁵

These themes of Jesus’ identity, Messiahship and discipleship provide a helpful framework for understanding the gospel of Mark and will be considered below, along with an examination of issues of authorship, dating, and original audience.

The kingdom of God which Jesus ushers in is thus not a kingdom relegated only to the realm of the mind or intellect but a kingdom that brings wholeness and restoration to all areas of life.

The Identity of Jesus and his Messiahship

Mark⁶ opens his gospel with, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). This summary statement captures the centrality of the character of Jesus Christ in Mark. The rest of the book develops who Jesus is and the nature of his identity. Throughout Mark, Jesus is the central character. With two exceptions (1:1-8; 6:14-29), all of the stories in Mark are about Jesus. The action, conflict and plot revolve around and develop through the character of Jesus. Not only is Jesus the central character, but the narrative is structured in careful, intentional ways to reveal the nature of Jesus' identity to readers. Mark's goal is to introduce Jesus to his readers, and so we must be looking for what we can glean about Jesus through Mark's narratives. Commentator James Edwards identifies that "Mark's portrayal of Jesus is characterized by three factors: his divine authority, his mission as the suffering Servant of God, and his divine Sonship."⁷ The prominence of these themes warrant consideration as a framework for understanding Jesus as depicted by Mark.

Jesus' Divine Authority

Jesus commands authority through his words and deeds, and through these words and deeds, establishes the coming Kingdom of God (which he announces in 1:15). Even from chapter 1, Jesus' authority in teaching in the synagogue is recognized and brings amazement (1:21-28). Also throughout the book, Jesus consistently claims prerogative to do things that humans are unable to do. He professes forgiveness of sins (2:5-12), a task recognized as something only entrusted to God. Nature, even with its roaring waves and wind, are no match for Jesus' power, as he calms the sea with a simple command (4:35-41) and traverses a stormy sea (6:45-52). Human disease also proves weak in light of Jesus' power. As early as chapter 1 (1:29-34) Jesus vanquishes sickness, and continues to heal throughout the book.⁸ Jesus' power also extends to the demonic world as he ousts many demons from individuals and silences them (5:1-20). Even death is powerless against Jesus (5:21-24, 35-43).⁹

While sometimes readers of Scripture and interpreters of Jesus' life tend to hold his teachings as more authoritative or revelatory of his identity than other events of his life, accounts of Jesus' miracles are rather what dominate much of Mark. In fact, it is striking how little of Jesus' teaching is recorded in Mark. Most of what is recorded are things Jesus does.

The kingdom of God which Jesus ushers in is thus not a kingdom relegated only to the realm of the mind or intellect but a kingdom that brings wholeness and restoration to all areas of life.

Jesus' Mission as the Suffering Servant of God

The suffering and death of Jesus plays a prominent role in Mark's gospel, as the final portion of Jesus' ministry occupies nearly half of the 16-chapter gospel. Not only does Mark give specific attention to the pain and death of Jesus in the last chapters of the gospel, but this imminent outcome is foreshadowed throughout the gospel. Even as early as Mark 2:20, Jesus begins hinting at the culmination of his time on earth: the ultimate sacrifice he will make on behalf of all people.

These predictions continue during Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), and in 10:45 Jesus makes a more explicit statement of his understanding of his servant task: "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."

Jesus' suffering is also a clear reminder of his humanity. The pain he experiences due to physical injury and betrayal of friendship points to his identity as a fully human man. Paired with his divine mission of salvation which culminates on the cross reveals a clear picture of Jesus' full divinity and full humanity.¹⁰

Jesus' Divine Sonship

At key points throughout the book of Mark, Jesus is declared to be the Son of God. Mark includes this identity in the introductory sentence (1:1), and the passion narrative builds to a climax of the Roman centurion's declaration: "'Surely this man was the Son of God!'" (15:39). These two statements bookend a theme Mark develops through his gospel, both the affirmation of Jesus as truly God's Son, "but also what kind of Son of God [Jesus] is."¹¹

Though a variety of titles (Christ, Messiah, Son of David, Lord, teacher, rabbi) are used to describe Jesus in Mark, the title "Son of God" holds particular prominence. Both at his baptism (1:11) and at the transfiguration (9:7), God declares Jesus to be "'my Son, whom I love.'" This declaration affirms what is true about Jesus: that he is fully divine and of the same being as the Father. This is also frequently how demons describe Jesus (3:11; 5:7).

"Because [the demons] knew who [Jesus] was," Mark writes, "[Jesus] would not let the demons speak" (1:34). Commentator Robert Stein writes, "This indicates that the demons serve as an authoritative 'spokesman' for the Markan Christology."¹²

It is curious that Jesus frequently silences demons and others (e.g., Peter, in 8:29-30) who make affirmations about his true identity as Son of God and Messiah. This theme of secrecy surrounding Jesus' identity is much more prominent in the book of Mark than in other gospels. There are several likely reasons for this.¹³

First, Jesus wanted to define his identity on his own terms, and not have his identity conflated with the connotations associated with certain titles, particularly Messiah. Jesus knew that his identity could not be fully known until the cross, so premature labels were thus ineffective and even misleading, making him extremely hesitant to use these titles for himself.

First century Israel was a time of deep political unrest. The Jewish people had been long expecting a "Messiah" to save them from the oppression of Roman tyranny. Enter Jesus, who spoke of a new kingdom, exercised authority, and had the ability to gather large groups of people towards him. Political zealots probably saw much potential in Jesus to be the long awaited political Messiah.¹⁴

Knowing that actively associating himself with titles such as "Messiah," "King of the Jews," and "Son of David," would mislead people to think that his ministry was political, Jesus resisted these labels. Jesus' mission was to usher in the kingdom of God (1:15), not usurp Roman authority. Stein writes,

"Since Jesus's own understanding of his messiahship was so radically different from that of his audience it was expedient to avoid the public use of such titles. The more enigmatic 'Son of Man' served as a better designation, and through it he was able to teach that his ministry involved not political revolution but giving his life as a ransom for many."¹⁵

Jesus was crucified due to his assertion of divine authority, not because of his politics.

Suffering was a large part of Jesus' Messiahship, but this was not something which could be fully understood until the cross.

As Darrell Bock writes, Jesus was "working to recast, not simply accept . . . the term Messiah." Much of that recasting involved including suffering as a key component of how Jesus brought about salvation. Thus any understanding of Jesus as Messiah before the cross was ultimately a limited and perhaps unhelpful understanding, leading to Jesus' reluctance of being associated with this title.¹⁷

Mark: A Call to Discipleship

Timothy Keller writes that the gospel of Mark is “about being called to follow a King.”¹⁸ Mark ends abruptly with the women leaving the empty tomb in fear (16:6-8). This sudden ending prompts a question for every reader of Mark: “What will one do with what God has done for Jesus and what this Jesus asks of those who hear about him?”¹⁹ Mark has laid his case, communicating select events of Jesus’ life and the nature of his identity and Messiahship.

The disciples in Mark are not flat characters. They are at times believing, while also sometimes confused by Jesus. They both exercise great faith and become absorbed by trivial concerns. Yet, despite their sometimes frustrating lethargy in coming to a full belief in Jesus, their companionship of Jesus seems to take precedence in Mark over comprehensive belief: “Discipleship is repeatedly defined in Mark by simple proximity to Jesus: being with him (3:13), sitting around him (3:34, 4:10), hearing him (4:1-20), and following him ‘on the way’ (1:16-20; 10:52).”²⁰

Following Jesus and taking part in the mission of his kingdom - in all the broadness and ambiguity that entails - are key criteria in discipleship. Thus the question presented to the readers throughout is repeatedly: Will you follow the King and participate in the Kingdom?

Authorship, Dating, Original Audience

Before embarking on the text of Mark, a few additional preliminary issues need to be addressed. Here issues concerning the authorship of Mark, dating, and intended original audience of Mark will be considered before launching into the text itself.

Authorship

Technically, the Gospel of Mark is an anonymous account, as nowhere in the text does the author identify themselves. Many scholars, however, attribute this gospel to John Mark, a close friend of Peter. Peter is also widely thought to be the main source of information about Jesus for John Mark. John Mark appears sporadically in the New Testament. His mother's house was a gathering place for the disciples (Acts 12:12) and likely the location of the Last Supper (Acts 1:13-14; Mark 14:14).²¹

John Mark himself traveled with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25; 13:4) until he left Paul and Barnabas in Perga in Pamphylia (Acts 13:13). Because Paul felt that John Mark had abandoned the first journey, he did not allow him to participate in the second missionary journey. Barnabas disagreed. This conflict over John Mark caused a split between Paul and Barnabas, causing the two to go their separate ways. Ultimately Paul chose Silas as a traveling companion, while Barnabas invited John Mark for his subsequent journey (Acts 15:37-41).²²

While there is not universal agreement among scholars regarding John Mark being the author, there is strong consensus among evangelical scholars that he indeed authored Mark. The strongest evidence for this conclusion comes from the fact that early church traditions affirm him as the author. There is no documented doubt among early church fathers that the author was anyone but Mark.²³

Additionally, stylistic and thematic connections can be made between Mark's gospel and Peter's speech in Acts (Acts 10:34-43), indicating that Peter was likely John Mark's source material. Mark also records events Peter specifically witnessed.²⁴

However, the case for John Mark authorship is not fully watertight, and there are legitimate factors to consider that can point to an author besides John Mark. Overall, though, our faith does not rest on whether John Mark was the author or not. As Stein writes, "the truthfulness of the miracle accounts in Mark does not require Markan authorship."²⁵

Dating and Audience

Most scholars believe that Mark was written in the late 60's AD, likely after Peter's death in 64 AD but before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.²⁶ The intended original audience of Mark also affects the dating of the book, as Mark is believed to be addressed to a group of persecuted Christians. Aligning known times of persecution historically with the probable region where Mark's audience was located can help to more precisely determine the date of writing.

Firstly, it is believed that Mark was written to Gentile, Roman Christians. Mark's minimal usage of the Old Testament, and providing of explanation of Jewish traditions and customs indicates he was likely writing to a Gentile audience (7:3-4; 12:18; 14:12; 15:42). Had he been writing to a Jewish audience, these explanations would be unnecessary. Also, Gentile and Roman characters are not presented negatively. For instance, the Gentile (Syrophoenician) woman professes great faith (7:24-30) and the Roman centurion declares Jesus' identity (15:39).²⁷

It is also thought that Mark was written to a group of persecuted Christians. The theme of suffering as being inextricably linked with discipleship and the weighty emphasis Mark gives to Jesus' suffering and crucifixion would have been a great source of encouragement to readers also experiencing suffering.²⁸

Identifying both that the audience of Mark was likely Gentile, and that they were likely experiencing persecution, helps determine the date of Mark's authorship. Harsh Roman persecution imposed on Christians during the late 60's AD makes it likely that this is when Mark was written.

Moving Forward

Mark is to be read as a narrative firmly rooted in historical events.²⁹ In reading this carefully crafted Gospel, we encounter the dynamic, perplexing person of Jesus Christ, a figure who inaugurates the long-awaited kingdom of God, cares deeply for the people he comes in contact with, and ultimately gives his life as a sacrifice for humanity.

Joel Williams identifies some important questions to consider as we read this gospel. These questions are helpful to acknowledge both the historical and narrative features of this book:

- ï “What does this passage in the Gospels mean?
- ï What particular message about Jesus is being emphasized in this passage?
- ï How does the narrative shape of the Gospels help to communicate this message?”³⁰

He finishes his list with the question, “What is the appropriate response to this story of Jesus?”, which is perhaps the most critical question we can be asking.³¹ The Gospel of Mark is not a sterile history text, nor a strict biography. It is the story of the good news of Jesus Christ, a story that demands a response of discipleship by following the King and participating in the Kingdom.

Additional Resources

Excerpt from Four Portraits, One Jesus by Mark L. Strauss³²

The Gospels are Historical Literature

The Gospels are historical in at least three ways. First, they have a history of composition. The authors drew on traditions and sources available to them to compile their works. The methods used to determine how the Gospels came to be are collectively known as historical criticism, or the historical-critical method . . .

Second, the Gospels are historical in that they are set in a specific historical context. This setting is first-century Palestine during the period of Roman occupation. To understand the Gospels, we must enter into the world in which they were written, a world very different than our own . . .

Third, the Gospels are historical in that they are meant to convey accurate historical information. This is implicit in all four Gospels and is explicitly stated by John (21:24) and Luke (1:1-4) . . .

The fact that the Gospels are historical in this third sense has profound implications for Christianity as a religion. The faith of the Gospel writers is based not on the esoteric teachings of a first-century philosopher nor on religious myths with symbolic meaning. It is based on the historical person and work of Jesus Christ. The Gospels claim to be the record of God's actions in human history, his entrance into human history in the person of his Son.

As an essentially historical religion, Christianity rises or falls on the historicity of core Gospel events: (1) Jesus' words and deeds, (2) his death on the cross, and (3) his resurrection, the vindication of his claims. As the apostle Paul wrote with reference to Jesus' resurrection, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). For Paul, as for the Gospel writers, the historicity of these events confirm the truth of Christianity.

The Gospels are Narrative Literature

Although historical in nature, the Gospels are not merely collections of reports or sayings of the historical Jesus. They are also narratives with features typical of stories, including plot, characters, and setting. While all four Gospels are concerned with the same historical events – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – they present different versions of these events. They present characters from different perspectives. They develop plot in different ways. They emphasize different settings. Viewing the Gospels as narrative provides important insights into their literary and theological distinctions . . .

The Gospels are Theological Literature

While the Gospels are meant to be historical, they are more than unbiased news reports. They are theological documents written to instruct and encourage believers and to convince unbelievers of the truth of their message. This is evident in that they focus especially on the saving work accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is why we call the Gospel writers Evangelists . . . They are proclaimers of the good news about Jesus Christ and the coming of the kingdom of God . . .

In summary, we can classify Gospels as historical narrative motivated by theological concerns. Their intention is not only to convey accurate historical material about Jesus, but also to explain and interpret these salvation-bringing events. The Gospels were written not by detached, uninterested observers but by Evangelists, “proclaimers of good news,” announcing the good news of Jesus Christ and calling people to faith in him.

Waterstone Small Group Covenant

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE — I covenant that there is nothing that anyone in the group has done or will do that will make me stop loving them. I may not agree with their actions, but I will love them as a person and do all I can to hold them up to God's affirming love.

CONFIDENTIALITY — I promise to keep whatever is shared in the group as confidential. I will not discuss another small group member's words, attitudes or life conditions with anyone outside the small group unless specific permission is given to do so. I understand that without this important element the group won't survive.

HONESTY — I will speak the truth with the desire to not be offensive to the group members. If I am having trouble with another person's personality, I will be honest about it and approach that person in-person outside of the group. I will not resort to personal attacks in or out of the group.

PRAYER — I commit to pray for those in the group on a consistent basis.

ACCOUNTABILITY — I covenant to come each week prepared to participate. I will make a serious attempt to have the lesson reviewed so that I am able to wholeheartedly engage in the group discussions.

OPENNESS — I covenant to strive to become a more open person, disclosing my feelings, struggles, joys, and hurts to those in my small group as much as I am able. The degree to which I do so implies that I cannot make it without them, that I trust them with my problems and hopes, and that I need them. This is to affirm their worth to me as a person.

SENSITIVITY — I promise to be a good listener. Even as I desire to be known and understood by the others in the group, I covenant to be sensitive to each person. I will be attentive when they are speaking, and I will protect their feelings even though they react differently than me. I will self-monitor how much I am talking so that I don't dominate the discussion. I will not be the resident know-it-all who freely gives unwanted advice. I will not be shocked, condemning, or condescending.

I will not resort to labels such as "emotional," "not very bright," "too intellectual," "liberal," or "conservative." I will listen and seek to understand with a humble heart.

AVAILABILITY — Anything I have: time, energy, insight, possessions, is at the disposal of those who need it, to the limit of my resources. I give these freely as I give myself as long as they do not interfere with the prior covenants with God or my family, which take precedence.

God being my helper, I enter into this covenant:

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- 1 Rick Gekoski, "What's the Definition of a Great Book?" *The Guardian*, December 23, 2011, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/23/definition-greatbookrickgekoski>.
 - 2 James Edwards writes that "Mark has . . . implicit major themes, requiring readers to enter into the drama of the Gospel in order to understand its meaning" (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002], 13).
 - 3 Caleb Lindgren, "Why Don't the Gospel Writers Tell the Same Story?: An Interview with Michael Licona," *Christianity Today* 61, no. (May 2017): 45.
 - 4 Darrell Bock, *Mark* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 37.
 - 5 Gekoski, "What's the Definition of a Great Book?"
 - 6 While issues of authorship will be discussed more in full below, ultimately this curriculum will operate with the conclusion that John Mark authored *The Gospel of Mark*.
 - 7 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 13.
 - 8 Mark 1:40-45, 2:1-12, 3:1-6, 3:10, 5:25-34, 6:5, 6:13, 6:54-56, 7:31-37, 8:22-26, 10:46-52.
 - 9 Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 23; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 13-14; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 27-28.
 - 10 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 2.
 - 11 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 15.
 - 12 Stein, *Mark*, 23; Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd Edition (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 132; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 15.
 - 13 The most compelling reasons are listed here. See Stein, *Mark*, 23-26 for a fuller articulation of more theories.
 - 14 Suzanne Watts Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12;
 - 15 Stein, *Mark*, 25; 22.
 - 16 Bock, *Mark*, 35, emphasis original.
 - 17 Mark L. Strauss, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 18; Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship*, 11-13; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 19.
 - 18 Timothy Keller, *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Dutton Redeemer, 2011), 20.
 - 19 Bock, *Mark*, 39.
 - 20 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 16.
 - 21 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 5.
 - 22 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 5; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 21.
 - 23 Stein, *Mark*, 1-2; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 7-9. Most notably, early church historian Eusebius, includes a quote from Papias in his text which links John Mark to Mark. (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 6-9). For a good overview of different scholars on this issue of author and dating see Bock, *Mark*, 1-10.
 - 24 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 10-12.
 - 25 Stein, *Mark*, 8. Stein does a good job of succinctly presenting the authorship issue (Stein, *Mark*, 1-9; esp. pages 8-9 for an overview of his conclusions).
 - 26 Stein, *Mark*, 4; 7.
 - 27 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 10.
 - 28 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 15; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 10.
 - 29 David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 5; Joel F. Williams, "Listening to the Voice of the Storyteller in Mark's Gospel," *Review & Expositor* 107, no. 3 (Summer 2010), accessed April 22, 2017, EBSCOhost
 - 30 Williams, "Listening to the Voice of the Storyteller," 311.
 - 31 Williams, "Listening to the Voice of the Storyteller," 311.
 - 32 Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 27-29.



NEGEV DESERT, ISRAEL

LESSON ONE

Mark 8:31-9:29

The Suffering Messiah

To follow a 'Christ' of the imagination is to
commit one's life to a phantom.¹

Stuart Briscoe

STARTER

The Star Wars movies tell the story of the Rebels (the good guys) trying to conquer the evil Empire (the bad guys). In *A New Hope*, the original Star Wars film, the audience is introduced to a series of characters attempting to find their place in this galactic space opera. Our heroes are comprised of a smuggler, rebel princess, orphan farm boy, and aging Jedi Master who faces off against Darth Vader, the leader of the Empire. Luke Skywalker, the orphan boy, meets Obi-Wan Kenobi, the Jedi Master, who tells him that his father was killed by Darth Vader and begins to train him in the mystical ways of the Jedi Order. Together, along with others, they rescue the rebel princess from the Empire's fortress, and greatest battleship, the Death Star. Ultimately, they succeed in destroying the Death Star and crippling the Empire, but not without casualties, including the loss of Obi-Wan.

The second film, *The Empire Strikes Back*, picks up with the Empire mercilessly tracking down and destroying the remnant of the rebel forces. Luke continues his Jedi training and in the final act, Luke faces Darth Vader in battle. At the end of the battle, the following conversation brings about an unexpected plot twist.

Darth Vader: Luke, you do not yet realize your importance. You have only begun to discover your power. Join me, and I will complete your training. With our combined strength, we can end this destructive conflict and bring order to the galaxy.

Luke Skywalker: I'll never join you!

Darth Vader: If you only knew the power of The Dark Side! Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father.

Luke Skywalker: He told me enough! He told me you killed him!

Darth Vader: No. I am your father.

Luke Skywalker: No... that's not true! That's impossible!

Darth Vader: Search your feelings. You know it to be true.

Luke Skywalker: NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! NOOOOOOOOO!

Luke is shocked to find that the leader of the evil Empire is actually his father.

The second half of the Gospel of Mark also reveals a significant plot twist. Mark provides glimpses in the first half of the Gospel that reveal Jesus as someone unique: he has authority and the power to heal, cast out demons, and harness nature in ways unlike anyone else. Finally by the end of the first half of the Gospel, the disciples realize who Jesus is: he is the Messiah. Yet the Jews understood the Messiah to be someone who would bring political and military victory and freedom for the Jews.

The very beginning of this second half of the Gospel, though, turns everything on its head: Jesus is the Messiah, but he is a Messiah who will suffer and die. This shocks the disciples, who respond with horror and fear.

Just as Luke Skywalker cannot accept the fact of Darth Vader being his true father, so the disciples cannot accept the fact that their Messiah, Jesus, will suffer and die a shameful death. The second half of Mark's Gospel shows disciples who struggle to accept this reality and make sense of who Jesus really is as Messiah.

1. What is one of your favorite movies? Why?
2. What is the highest elevation you've ever set foot on?
3. What is an outdoor location where you connect with God?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 8:31 – 9:29 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

Rebukes of Peter and Jesus

Mark 8:31 picks up in the middle of a conversation between Jesus and his disciples. In the first part of the conversation, Peter and the disciples declare Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah. This declaration is a profound one, showing after eight chapters of journeying with and learning from Jesus that the disciples finally begin to understand who Jesus is.

Right after this profound declaration, Jesus tells his disciples of his future suffering, rejection, and ultimately death and resurrection. Jesus refers to himself as the "Son of Man" in this conversation (8:31).

The Son of Man, a title stemming from the Old Testament (see Dan. 7:13-14), occurs 14 times in Mark, and is used only by Jesus to describe himself. This title does not simply indicate Jesus was human, but signifies Jesus' future judgment (Mark 8:38; 13:26; 14:62), authority (over sins, 2:10; over Sabbath, 2:28), and suffering as part of his earthly mission (8:31; 9:9; 12:31, 10:33; 10:45; 14:21 [twice]; 14:41). Because of its frequent association with suffering, the title Son of Man denotes the role of suffering involved in fulfilling God's will as his Son.²

For the disciples, whose concept of Messiah involves victory, power, and glory, hearing such predictions of suffering must have been startling and alarming. These statements about the turmoil Jesus was to experience unsettle Peter and the disciples, and immediately Peter rebukes Jesus for making these predictions (8:31-32). His concept of Messiah had no room for a suffering Messiah; this paradigm did not fit the preconceived notions of Messiah. Jesus' assertions presented a Messiah that the disciples did not recognize, or, probably, did not want to believe in. In fact, the concept of a suffering Messiah was likely even offensive to the disciples. In their anticipation of a victorious and powerful Messiah, the notion of a suffering Messiah was a totally foreign idea, and probably a scary one.³

In response to Peter's rebuke of Jesus, Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter. This reprimand is harsh: "'Get behind me, Satan!' [Jesus] said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns'" (8:33). Jesus' rebuke is likely so harsh because Peter, in his refusal to accept what Jesus is saying about his future, is denying who Jesus is as Messiah. It is important to clarify that "Peter is addressed as Satan not because he is possessed but because he is thinking in ways opposed to God."⁴

Peter refuses to take Jesus at his word for who he is, preferring instead to conceive of Jesus as Messiah under his own terms and conditions, one that does not involve terrible suffering and death: "It was unthinkable to Peter that Jesus could succeed as Christ without being accepted and embraced by the formidable forces of contemporary politics, religion, and morality. But that was exactly how it was going to be!"⁵ Or, perhaps Jesus' harsh rebuke stems more from the fact that Peter is presenting an attractive temptation to Jesus. Jesus knows that his mission on earth involves suffering and death, but this is not an easy journey, one he would prefer not to travel (Mark 14:36).

Jesus then teaches that the suffering he will experience will also be something his disciples will experience. In fact, suffering is part of the very fabric of discipleship with Jesus; these two are inseparable. Being a disciple of Jesus involves "commitment...and perseverance," but it is an endeavor that is worth the sacrifices.⁶ Though following Jesus involves suffering, it is ultimately the way to true life. In fact, there is great irony in the fact "that the [person] who gains [their] life through denial of Jesus and the gospel suffers infinite loss."⁷

True life through following Jesus and discipleship is better than gaining the whole world. Worldly comforts and riches and success and anything else of this temporary world pales in comparison to knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. Ultimately, anything good in life necessitates sacrifice. A relationship with Jesus is no exception.

And, making the choice not to follow Jesus also comes with grave consequences. Jesus, Son of God, became a human man specifically so that people could know and relate to him and be in relationship with him. The very person of Jesus is an offer to know God deeply and an expression of God's yearning to be in relationship with his people. Those who refuse this revelation are rejecting God himself, which will have very real repercussions at Jesus' Second Coming.⁸

This section concludes with a rather puzzling statement by Jesus, in which he tells them that "'some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power'" (9:1). It is very unlikely that Jesus is referring here to his Second Coming. Because this statement is followed immediately by the account of the Transfiguration, which foreshadows Jesus' resurrection, it is likely "the Kingdom of God come with power" is referring to Jesus' resurrection.⁹

Transfiguration

Soon after these discussions of suffering, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a “high mountain” where an event known as the Transfiguration takes place. During the Transfiguration, Jesus is “transfigured” from a normal human appearance into a brilliant dazzling white, glowing with the glory of God (9:2). Moses and Elijah, Old Testament prophets, appear with Jesus on the mountain. In their fear, the disciples suggest building three shelters, one for each of them. Then, a cloud envelops the group and a voice from the cloud, a voice belonging to God, declares Jesus to be the Son of God.

Mark’s placement of this event after Jesus’ discussion about suffering and hardship is significant, intending that “we would associate the fullness of Christ’s glory with his death and resurrection.”¹⁰ The event of the Transfiguration reveals a “glimpse of [Jesus’] glorified state,” foreshadowing Jesus’ future exaltation that will come after his resurrection.¹¹

Jesus’ predictions of suffering and death cannot be separated from his future exaltation and glorification as Son of God. Jesus’ suffering and glorification together define what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. The strange and nearly incomprehensible juxtaposition of suffering and glory is mixed up together in what it means for Jesus to be Messiah.

Understandably, the disciples are confused and afraid as they try and make sense of this event and of their Messiah being one who will both suffer and be glorified (9:6; 10). In their confusion, Peter offers to build three tents, one for each Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. While this seems like an odd suggestion, comical even, this offer actually makes a lot of sense. Establishing a specific tent, or place, for God to dwell was historically what the Jews had done to indicate the presence of God. Peter and the disciples recognize they are in the presence of God, so continuing in Old Testament tradition by erecting a place for this presence to reside is a logical idea.

However, this offer may also reveal the disciples' continued lack of understanding. They do not know how to interpret what is going on or who Jesus is, and so proffer this ultimately ignorant suggestion. Or, perhaps since Peter suggests that a tent be erected for each of the three men, this shows Peter equating Jesus with Moses and Elijah. Perhaps Peter still does not quite understand that Jesus is categorically different than the prophets.

Yet despite the disciples' continued lack of understanding, Jesus still intentionally includes his disciples in witnessing the Transfiguration. Desiring that his disciples know him better, Jesus persistently invites them into opportunities where they can learn more about who he is.¹²

It is significant that Moses and Elijah are present with Jesus on the mountain.¹³ As prophets, Moses and Elijah are precursors to the ultimate revelation of the Messiah. God used Moses and Elijah, among other prophets and prophetesses throughout the Old Testament, to reveal himself to the nation of Israel and to teach the Israelites about who God is and how they should live in response.

As the incarnation of God himself, Jesus is the fullest revelation of God to humanity. Thus to have these three together on the mountain is witness to the fullness of God's revelation to humanity. Jesus does not come out of nowhere to bring salvation, but rather is the culmination of God's long trajectory of redemption of which he is the fulfillment.¹⁴

The disciples then ask Jesus an appropriate question in 9:11 about the order of the return of the prophets. Familiar with the Scriptures, the disciples know that the prophecy surrounding Elijah asserts that Elijah will bring restoration (Malachi 4:5-6).¹⁵ If Elijah is going to bring restoration, as this Old Testament prophecy maintains, the disciples, in their question are really asking why the Messiah has to suffer. This question "is a leading question, the intention of which is to suggest that Elijah's return to restore all things should obviate the need of the Son of Man to go to the cross."¹⁶ If Elijah will bring restoration, why should the Messiah have to suffer in securing restoration? Again, the role of the Messiah as a suffering Messiah is an obstacle for the disciples.

Without denying Elijah's restorative role, Jesus again maintains that his identity involves both suffering and rejection. It is likely that in 9:12 Jesus is referencing the idea of the suffering servant from Isaiah 53:3, again pointing to the fact that this role of suffering is deeply imbedded in the identity as Messiah. And the mention of Elijah's suffering is referencing the suffering and execution of John the Baptist (see Matt. 17:13).¹⁷ Only through suffering will God bring about redemption and restoration.

Healing of a Boy with a Demon

While Jesus, Peter, James and John were on the mountain, the other disciples were busy healing and exorcising demons. However, the disciples were unable to exorcise one demon in particular, one who was wreaking havoc in a little boy. The boy's father describes a ghastly situation of an evil spirit completely ravaging the life of his son.

The father comes to Jesus desperate for healing in a desperate situation. Because Jesus' disciples were unsuccessful in exorcising the demon, the father was skeptical that Jesus would be able to drive out the demon (9:18; 22).¹⁸ Jesus challenges the father's doubt (9:23), to which the father responds in a beautiful declaration of humble faith: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (9:24).

The father's declaration of faith was enough for Jesus to heal the little boy from his debilitating condition. While the father may not have had a surpassing quantity of faith, the object of his faith was in the correct place: in Jesus. True faith is more about faith having the proper object, Jesus, than it is the quantity or quality of faith.¹⁹

The disciples then ask the question the reader is already asking: "Why couldn't we drive [the demon] out?" (9:28). Why, indeed? Because Jesus responds saying that "this kind can only come out by prayer" (9:29), perhaps the disciples were attempting to rely on something besides prayer and dependence on God to cast out the demon. Possibly the disciples were relying on their own abilities or confidence, rather than God, to expel the demon. This lack of faith could have prevented them from completing this exorcism.²⁰

Group Questions

1. Before beginning this second half of the Gospel of Mark, where did we leave off from the fall series and the first half of the Gospel of Mark? What were some of the main events and themes from chapters 1-8? What can we learn about who Jesus is, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, and the nature of the Kingdom of God from those chapters?

2. Why does Peter rebuke Jesus for talking about his coming suffering and death? Why does Jesus then rebuke Peter so harshly? What is the warning Jesus is communicating to Peter and the disciples? What do we learn about Jesus as Messiah from his predictions of his death? What are the implications of an inaccurate understanding of Jesus as Messiah?

3. In Mark 8:34-38, what does Jesus say about what it costs to follow him as a disciple?

4. What happened on the Mount of Transfiguration? What do we learn about Jesus from this event? What was the disciples' response? Who else was present on the mountain? Why is their presence significant?

5. What do you observe in the interaction between the father's faith and doubt in this story when it comes to Jesus' power to heal (Mark 9:14-29)? Which is more significant: who the father had faith in, or the quantity of the father's faith? Why?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. Who do you see and understand Jesus to be? What has been the primary influence in shaping that belief (family, Scripture, culture, popular literature, the church, cultural values, etc.)? Does who you understand Jesus to be align with who Jesus is revealing himself to be in this section?

2. How has your relationship with Jesus affected your lifestyle? Your relationships? Your priorities? Your politics?

3. When have you felt like the boy's father (Mark 9:14-29)? What do you have the hardest time believing? (select any that apply)
How have you responded to these questions of doubt?

- a) That God exists at all
- b) That Jesus is the Son of God
- c) That God controls the world and my life
- d) That there is life after death
- e) That God loves me
- f) That God can do miracles today
- g) That God is good

Group Prayer

Let us pray along with the father from Mark 9:14-29, proclaiming our faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God, and confessing our unbelief. May we repent of the ways we have desired things of this world over being true disciples of Jesus (Mark 8:34-38).

Leader: Giver and sustainer of life, you are worthy of all our praise. We know that it is in you that we live and move and have our being and it is to you alone that we commit our lives.

Group: Forgive us for the ways we prefer things of this world over being your disciple. May we entrust our lives completely to you, God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For you are good and your love endures forever; your faithfulness continues through all generations. Lord, help us overcome our unbelief.

Leader: Oh merciful God, we declare our allegiance to you by praying the Apostles' Creed:

Group: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,

Leader: Who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Group: I believe in the Holy Spirit, The holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, The resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen." May our lives be an expression of this commitment to you. Jesus Christ, source of our hope and salvation, author and perfecter of our faith, may our eyes be ever fixed on you.

Leader: "Father of mercy, your love embraces everyone
And through the resurrection of your Son you call us all into your wonderful light.

Group: Dispel our darkness and make us a people with one heart and one voice, Forever singing your praise, in Jesus, the Christ, our Lord. Amen."²¹

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- 1 D. Stuart Briscoe, *Discipleship for Ordinary People* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994), 51.
 - 2 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 81-81; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 298.
 - 3 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 296; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 253-254; Bock, *Mark*, 243.
 - 4 Bock, *Mark*, 244.
 - 5 Briscoe, *Discipleship for Ordinary People*, 51.
 - 6 Bock, *Mark*, 245.
 - 7 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 309; Bock, *Mark*; 245; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 256; Lane, 306; 309.
 - 8 Bock, *Mark*, 246.
 - 9 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 259-260.
 - 10 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 158.
 - 11 Bock, *Mark*, 249; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 318; 320; 323; 313-314; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 263; 273.
 - 12 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 269; 266; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 319; Bock, *Mark*, 250-251.
 - 13 Through Moses, God freed the nation of Israel from Egyptian enslavement and established them as a people set apart for God. God communicated the law through Moses (such as the 10 Commandments). Elijah was a prophet instrumental in opposing the wicked King Ahab and wife Jezebel and ending worship of the idol Baal.
 - 14 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 266.
 - 15 Malachi 4:5-6: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."
 - 16 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 274.
 - 17 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 274-275; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 325-326.
 - 18 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 331-332; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 276; Bock, *Mark*, 257.
 - 19 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 280.
 - 20 Bock, *Mark*, 258; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 281; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 332.
 - 21 Order of St. Benedict, *The Glenstal Book of Prayer: A Benedictine Prayer Book* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 17.
Excerpts also from Acts 17:28, Psalm 100:5, Hebrews 12:2.

NOTES

THE DEAD SEA, ISRAEL





LESSON TWO

Mark 9:30-10:31

Radical Obedience

Discipleship means welcoming and caring for those who are of least concern to others. Ministry in the name of Christ means giving priority to those who are without power, prestige, and possessions – in other words, those who cannot advance our professional standing, contribute to our social status, or reciprocate our material support.¹

Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm

STARTER

What follows is the temporal destiny of the Twelve disciples of Jesus Christ:

1. James the son of Zebedee (fisherman, brother of John, one of the "sons of thunder" a nickname from Jesus) once asked Jesus to sit next to him in the place of honor in the kingdom. Jesus responded that he would drink of the same cup his Master was to drink. He was the first apostle martyred, beheaded in A.D. 36 by Herod Agrippa.
2. John, after years of preaching in Ephesus was exiled to the isle of Patmos where he would spend much of his Christian life alone. He was the only one of the twelve to escape a violent death.
3. James, the son of Alphaeus, is believed to have been stoned to death.
4. Judas, also called Thaddaeus, was martyred in Persia.
5. Judas Iscariot betrayed the Lord and killed himself.
6. Peter, brother of Andrew, was nicknamed "Rocky" by Jesus because of his prominent place among the Twelve as well as his hardheaded personality. He was crucified upside down under Nero's reign of terror in the city of Rome.
7. Philip was crucified in Phrygia after a lengthy imprisonment.
8. Matthew, the tax collector, was run through with a spear in Ethiopia.
9. Andrew, the older brother of Peter, preached in many Asiatic nations. He was crucified on a X-shaped cross in Edessa.

10. Bartholomew translated and carried the gospel of Matthew into the language of the Armenians. After diverse persecutions he was beaten and crucified.

11. Simon, called the Zealot, took the gospel to Mauritania and was crucified there in Africa.

12. Thomas preached to the people of India. He died in Calamina after he was run through with spears and thrown into the fire.

You may be thinking two things right now: 1) I'm glad I wasn't one of the Twelve! 2) They must have been a special group of men.

They weren't. In the eyes of the world, as far as credentials go, none of them would have been on the "A-List" of people selected to shape a world religion. They offered little in terms of influence, experience, education or power. They were fishermen, tax collectors, men with families. They made a living during the day and tried to give to Jesus as they could. They were fickle, fragile and very human. They were all like you and me.

1. How do you spend your time (you can answer with what you do for a living, what you like to do in your free time, etc.)?

2. What is something at which you are skilled?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 9:30-10:31 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

Before launching into a series of longer teachings in this section, Jesus has several conversations with just his disciples. In 9:30-32 Jesus again predicts his upcoming betrayal and death and resurrection, which the disciples still do not understand. Naturally there is much fear and uncertainty on behalf of the disciples surrounding these predictions. Ironically, this serious conversation is followed by one about which disciple is the greatest. The disciples' jostling with each other to secure a position of prestige is met with a rebuttal by Jesus: sacrifice and service to others, not clamoring for high merit, is the mark of greatness and true discipleship. And this discipleship is not exclusive to the Twelve but is available to anyone who calls upon the name of Jesus (9:38-41).²

Seriousness of Sin

In 9:42-50 Jesus lists a string of harsh, almost ridiculous commands to people persisting in sinful behavior. Clearly these statements are hyperbolic; Jesus does not intend for anyone to actually cut off limbs or gouge out eyes. Yet these extreme statements are arresting enough to signal to the reader that Jesus takes sin seriously. Sin is dangerous and has the potential for vast destruction. Therefore, avoiding sin and fleeing from temptations to sin should be a high priority for a disciple of Jesus.

Entering the Kingdom of God, Jesus insists, is far more desirable and important than anything we hold dear on earth, including our bodies. Ultimately it is better to endure temporary pain by working to counter the effects of sin in our lives than to suffer eternity apart from God. Not only does sin restrict and ensnare individuals personally, but it severely limits humans' ability to effectively participate in the larger Kingdom of God.³

Divorce and Marriage

Jesus' next teaching comes as a result of a leading question by the Pharisees, who ask Jesus about the nature of divorce. Because they seem to know the answer to this question (in 10:4 they correctly answer that divorce initiated by a man is permissible under Mosaic law), it seems likely the Pharisees are trying to pinpoint more explicitly on what grounds specifically divorce is permitted.⁴

Refusing to fall sway to legalism, Jesus instead responds broadly to their question. Jesus goes back to Genesis to describe the original intention for marriage: a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman created by God from the very beginning of humanity.⁵ What Jesus describes here as the design of marriage is the core of Jesus' teaching in 10:1-12. Because Jesus shifts the conversation from the Pharisees' question of specific and legitimate grounds for divorce to God's desire for what marriage is more widely, attempts to extract from this passage particular justifications for divorce is not a helpful way to approach this passage. Rather, Jesus' central teaching here is on the design of marriage as a sacred, unbreakable commitment before God.⁶

The reality of a sinful world and sinful individuals, however, provide an exception to this ideal in extreme cases (adultery, abuse of any kind, etc.). And, while divorce is not the intended outcome of marriage, God is a loving father, quick to show grace and forgiveness to those who repent, and is powerful to redeem broken situations for his glory.

For followers of Christ who are married, persevering in marriage and seeking after the ideal as God intended it is a large part of Christian obedience and discipleship. James Edwards makes the astute observation:

“The question in our day of impermanent commitments and casual divorce is whether we as Christians will hear the unique call of Christ to discipleship in marriage. In marriage, as in other areas to which the call of Christ applies, will we seek relief in what is permitted, or commit ourselves to what is intended by God and commanded by Christ? Will we fall away in trouble and difficulty (4:17), or follow Jesus in the costly journey of discipleship, even in marriage? Will we sunder the divine union of ‘two become one flesh,’ or will we honor and nurture marriage as a gift and creation of God?”⁷

In addition to squashing the Pharisees’ rather petty question with a remarkably radical assertion about the beauty and depth of the marriage relationship, Jesus also remarkably affirms women in this passage. In the culture at the time, men held far more power than women. It was only by and through relationships with men that women had any social standing; women were treated more as property than human persons. Even Old Testament law maintained that only men, not women, could initiate divorce.⁸

However, by Jesus permitting women to request a divorce (10:12), Jesus elevates women to an entirely new status. The fact that women could be victims of marital infidelity is truly momentous, as it raises women to a new level of personhood. Women are fully human persons. They are not property to be owned or bodies to be enjoyed or entities to lord over in dominance. And it is this union of two fully human persons which is the original intent of marriage, the way God created it: “Jesus, however, teaches that marriage is not a male-dominated institution but a new creation of God, to which both husband and wife are equally responsible to practice discipleship in lifelong obedience.”⁹

Jesus and the Children

In another surprising twist, Jesus places high value on another subset of society not valued as full persons: children. Unlike society today where children are valued, perhaps even glorified, children in first-century Israel were seen as needy and dependent creatures not able to participate or contribute much to society. Yet "God continues to surprise us, to reverse our expectations and upset our careful calculation of what is good and valuable, what is first and last."¹⁰

Children are "small, powerless, without sophistication."¹¹ And it is primarily for these very reasons children were devalued in society that Jesus values them. Children are completely dependent upon others. And it is precisely when people realize their dependence upon God and have little of their own to give that they are most freely able to come before God and participate in his Kingdom.

The Rich Young Man

Jesus' next teaching about the Kingdom of God centers on wealth. A young rich man approaches Jesus and asks how he may inherit eternal life. "'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven,'" Jesus responds, "'then come, follow me'" (10:21). Yet because his wealth is dear to him, this young man is unable to obey Jesus' command.

Part of the sadness and irony surrounding this story is that the rich young man seems to be under the impression that he needs to do something to "inherit eternal life." He has kept all of the Commandments and now wants to continue doing the correct things to gain eternal life. Here again Mark proves to be a masterful narrator, in that the story immediately prior gives commentary on the young man's predicament. Whereas the young man desires to rely upon a level of achievement and status to enter the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of God is most accessible to those who truly recognize their dependence not on what they contribute but on God, such as little children. The Kingdom of God is not something earned but something received.¹²

Jesus uses this interaction as a teaching point to indicate the dangers of wealth. It is important to note that Jesus is not categorically condemning wealth here. Wealth is not inherently bad, nor is it wrong to be rich. However, wealth can be dangerous to disciples of Jesus. It is imperative that those with wealth resist the temptation to place ultimate trust for safety, security and comfort in possessions and wealth.

This seems to be the case for the rich young man, whose wealth is a barrier to discipleship. Because this man likely trusts too much in his wealth, he is unable to sell his possessions and trust completely in Jesus. Money, or anything else in life, that masquerades as a god in whom trust and security can be found needs to be seriously reevaluated.¹³

In the follow-up conversation with his disciples after the interaction with the rich young man, Jesus switches the focus on the conversation back to the Kingdom of God rather than the nature of eternal life. The disciples are still confused (understandably) about what Jesus is teaching in regards to the Kingdom of God. The disciples wonder, if it is so difficult for wealthy people to enter the Kingdom of God, who can be saved?

The fact that the disciples are asking this question shows that they are beginning to understand that participation in the Kingdom of God is possible by God's grace, not human achievement.

Following Jesus Christ as a disciple in this life demands sacrifice, prioritizing the pursuit of Jesus and his Kingdom over everything else in life. These earthly losses are not for waste; the result will be future abundant life with Jesus.¹⁴

Group Questions

1. Why does Jesus keep bringing up death and resurrection (9:30-32)? What is the disciples' reaction?

2. What can we learn about discipleship from 9:33-37? What are qualities that Jesus is encouraging and characteristics we should pursue as disciples of Christ?

3. What is the point of 9:42-50? What four things are "better"? What is the point of this hyperbole? What are the consequences of sin, and what does it look like to take sin seriously?

4. How are the Pharisees trying to test Jesus in 10:1-12? What is Jesus' response about the original intent of marriage? How seriously does God take marriage?

5. Why is it significant that Jesus mentions women in 10:12 and children in 10:13-16? How does this change the status of these groups that were marginalized in that culture?

6. What does the rich man love more than following Jesus? Is it truly impossible for "a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God" (10:25)? What is the warning here for those with wealth?

7. How does Jesus himself live out his command (to give up everything for the sake of the Kingdom of God) to the rich young ruler? (see Philippians 2:6-8)

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. What does servant leadership look like today (see Mark 9:33-37)? Is there someone in your life that exemplifies this well? Do your relationships tend to be defined by sacrifice and service for others, or attempts to maintain a certain status?

2. If Jesus were to evaluate your life, what would he say holds you back from total commitment to God? Choose all that apply, and expand on your response if you feel comfortable.

- a) wealth
- b) apathy
- c) habits or temptations
- d) doubts about faith
- e) the fear of being labeled or shunned
- f) other: _____

Group Prayer

Group members share prayer requests with one another.

Begin the prayer time with a time of silent confession to confess to God the ways in which things of this world have come in the way of following Jesus wholeheartedly.

Leader pray this prayer of forgiveness from

The Book of Common Prayer:

Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us all our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen us in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life.¹⁵

Group members pray aloud for one another's requests and that those in your group and members of Waterstone would follow Jesus wholeheartedly.

Additional Resources

Singleness

Jesus teaches that the design of marriage is a faithful commitment between husband and wife and that this faithful union embodies God's faithfulness to his people. Unmarried people are not excluded from embodying God's faithfulness through their sexuality: Faithful witness is the reason Christian ethics have always held open two paths for Christian sexual fidelity. The path of faithful marriage is a sign of God's faithfulness. The path of celibate singleness is a sign of God's faithfulness. When a single person doesn't have sex, his body is a testament to God's utter refusal to forsake us. When a married person remains faithful, her body is a testament to the same God.

In marriage, we bear witness to the world to the quality of the divine-human relationship. As in a faithful marriage, God is faithful to us. The husband and wife who are faithful to one another, while being different from another, are a sign of the ways that God is faithful to us, while being different from us. Singleness is a sign equal to marriage as singleness too points to God's faithfulness. In both marriage and singleness, we're embodying something about God's radical fidelity.¹⁶

Books on Sexuality

Gaines, Timothy R. and Shawna Songer Gaines. "Uncovering Christ: Sexuality in the Image of the Invisible God." In *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, edited by Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau, 92-106. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016.

This is a short, excellent article that explores the nature of the embodiment of Jesus Christ and human sexuality through the lens of defining sexuality as desire.

Jones, Beth Felker. *Faithful: A Theology of Sex*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015. This is a short, easy-to-read book on a Christian theology of sex and gender.

Yarhouse, Mark. *A. Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2010.

Yarhouse, Mark A. *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

Mark Yarhouse's website: <http://sexualidentityinstitute.org/>

Waterstone Position Paper: The Sanctity of Marriage

I. Introduction

We believe marriage is a gift from God for the shalom of men, women and children and for the common good of society. We believe that God has revealed to all people in all cultures his basis of morality in the ordering human relationships, and thus we view and practice marriage under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ who rules the Church through God's written Word, the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16).

The Bible itself, as the inspired and infallible Word of God, is the sole and final source of all that we believe concerning truth, morality, and proper conduct for individuals and organizations.

For the purposes of Waterstone's faith, doctrine, practice, policy, and discipline, the Waterstone elder board is our final interpretive authority on the Bible's meaning and application.

II. Marriage as a Creation Ordinance

When God created Adam and Eve, he ordained marriage as the fundamental institution of society (Genesis 1:27-28). In marriage, a man and a woman leave their families of origin and become united as "one flesh" in a new family unit (Genesis 2:24). The Scriptures render that marriage is to be honored in this way by all (Hebrews 13:4).

Marriage is a covenant between one man and one woman and between the participants and God (Malachi 2:14-16). It is therefore more than a temporary relationship of benefit and convenience or a well-intentioned promise kept if conditions are good. As a binding relationship established by vows, the marriage covenant is solemnly sealed by a ceremony witnessed by family and friends and recognized by the state.

When a believer marries, it is God's will that he or she be united only with another believer (2 Corinthians 6:14). Because God has created and instituted marriage as a lifelong, exclusive covenant (Matthew 22:23-30) and because the marriage covenant is to reflect the strength of God's covenant love for His people (Hosea 3:1), any variation from his ordained decree is diminishing to the participants and in violation of God's mandates for all people (Mark 10:11-12).

God ordained marriage for the following purposes:

The Glory of God - Marriage exists first and foremost to amplify God's reputation in his world. Human beings individually are image bearers of God (Genesis 1:26), but man and woman in marriage also display his heart and actions (Genesis 1:27-28). Marriage as a creation ordinance glorifies God as creator. Beyond that, marriage is to display God as redeemer, for Christian marriage is the consummate illustration of the redeeming grace of God in Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33). To the degree that Christians live out this pattern of God's love through His grace in Christ (Ephesians 5:1-2), they witness to one another, their children, the church, and the world the gospel of God's redeeming love in Christ. God's glory and our good complement each other, and therefore marriage exists for our good in the following ways.

Companionship - Genesis 2:18a teaches that "it is not good for a man to be alone." Therefore, from the beginning God called men and women to promote mutual care and friendship within their marriage relationship.

Mutual Growth - Genesis 2:18b adds "I will make a helper suitable for him." "Helper" is used in the Bible to describe God himself, and thus cannot mean merely assisting someone who could do the task almost as well without help. To "help" someone is to make up what is lacking in the other with your strength. "Suitable" translates a compound phrase which literally means "like opposite him." The entire narrative of Genesis 2, in which a piece of the man is removed to fashion the woman, strongly implies that each is incomplete without the other and therefore when united, growth results. Marriage is a massive spiritual discipline.

The Bearing, Nurturing, and Training of Children - Genesis 1:28 and Ephesians 6:4 teach that the marriage relationship is also for procreation and moral teaching of children (Deuteronomy 6:4-7).

Promoting the Stability of Society - When marriage, the foundational human relationship, is degraded, the family unit disintegrates and the fabric of any society unravels (cf. Genesis 2).

Affirming the Proper Context of Human Sexuality - Hebrews 13:4 clearly teaches that sexual intimacy should be reserved for a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage.

III. The Biblical View of Singleness

The sanctity of marriage does not negate the gift of celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:6). While marriage is a great blessing, it is not God's will that all should be married. Singleness in Scripture is presented as a great blessing with unique opportunities for an undivided devotion to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:1-35). Consequently, those whom God has called to be single for his sake should be recognized and honored in the Church.

IV. The Biblical View of Marriage

Scripture teaches that the one-flesh union of marriage constitutes an intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual unity. "So they are no longer two, but one" (Matthew 19:5-6). When the two become one flesh, the God-created individualities of the husband and wife are not lost; rather they challenge, complement and enrich each other. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul demonstrates that this "profound mystery" is analogous to the spiritual relationship between Christ and His church. "I am talking about Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31-33).

From Genesis to Revelation, sexual union in marriage is to be between a man and a woman. Sexual intercourse between people of the same sex is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments, and nowhere does Scripture allow or endorse same-sex unions (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; and see the Waterstone Position Paper on Homosexuality). Therefore, no Waterstone staff or leader will perform a wedding ceremony between members of the same gender, nor shall the church facility host a wedding ceremony between members of the same gender.

God designed marriage to be a lifelong relationship. Jesus said, "What God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:9). The marriage covenant should be kept sacred and unbroken under those conditions stated in the Bible. Given the complexities and challenges inherent in the merging of two selfish lives into one, premarital counseling is required before any Waterstone pastor officiates the marriage ceremony. We require premarital counseling primarily because we have observed that couples who, with humility and reverence for God's intentions for marriage, endure premarital counseling are more likely to ask for help when their marriage struggles because they've had the "counseling experience."

God-ordained marriage should remain pure in thought, motive, and practice. The seventh commandment prohibits adultery (Exodus 20:14). Jesus sets an even higher standard in his statement, "...anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery" (Matthew 5:27-28).

Furthermore, sexual relations outside of marriage are forbidden by Scripture (1 Corinthians 6:16-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4).

The Apostle Paul specifically commands believers to “abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thessalonians 4:3). The word “immorality” includes adultery, homosexual behavior, bestiality, incest, pornography and rape.

Emotional unfaithfulness to one’s spouse is equally sinful, and hence destructive to the marriage relationship. All forms of emotional and physical abuse violate the one-flesh covenantal relationship. We urge abused persons to consider their own safety and that of family members first, and to seek help from the church—and professional and legal resources as necessary—to bring healing to the individuals and to the marriage relationship (see Waterstone Position Paper on Divorce and Remarriage).

Ephesians 5:21 states that Christians should “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Mutual submission means that Christian husbands and wives must respect and honor one another, acknowledge one another’s gifts, mobilize one another’s strengths, and build one another up. Out of reverence for Christ, wives are to respect their husbands. Husbands are to love their wives even “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:22-26).

In such a marriage bond in Christ, husbands and wives seek together the Spirit’s guidance in family decisions, in the nurturing and training of their children in the faith, in all aspects of the flourishing of their family, and as a witness to the grace of God in their life together. This relationship between the man and the woman in marriage is informed by the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity, where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equal in essence, power, and glory while voluntarily admitting different functional roles.

We believe that God offers forgiveness, redemption, and restoration to all who confess and forsake their sin, seeking his mercy through Jesus Christ (Acts 3:19-21; Romans 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Conclusion

Concise statement on marriage: **We believe that God created marriage to be exclusively the union of one man and one woman, and that intimate sexual activity is to occur within that union.**

1 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 166.

2 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 166; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 287; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 339.

3 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 294; Bock, *Mark*, 264; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 168; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 348.

4 Beth Felker Jones, "Witnessing in Freedom: Resisting Commodification of the Image," in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 238.

5 Waterstone Community Church upholds that the covenant of marriage is between one man and one woman. However, it is also the responsibility of every follower of Christ to show abundant love and grace to each person, regardless of their sexual orientation. Recognizing that people are more than their sexuality and that Jesus spent time with those on the margins of society without first demanding behavioral changes (Mark 2:13-17, among other places), who are we as followers of Christ to withhold love and dignifying relationships with others?

6 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 303-305.

7 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 305.

8 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 173; Beth Felker Jones, "Witnessing in Freedom," 235. This is largely recognized as the case, although there are perhaps some exceptions to this rule documented in history (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 304).

9 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 298; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 173; "Christian sexual ethics are not just for women. They expect holiness, purity and chastity from men, too . . . Jesus radically equalizes the man and the woman in the one-flesh union. Both are persons in the mutual, consensual, covenantal freedom of that union. Either may violate it. Neither body is a piece of goods to be traded. Both bodies – united – should testify, in their union, to the faithfulness of God. When we embody our witness to the truth that bodies are not commodities we bear witness to the freedom that is in Christ and to the faithfulness Jesus shows to the Father and to us" (Beth Felker Jones, "Witnessing in Freedom," 238-239).

10 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 176.

11 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 307; Bock, *Mark*, 271; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 360.

12 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 177; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 311; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 360, 365.

13 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 368-369; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 314; Bock writes that wealth dulls our senses and makes us "numb...of need for God" (Mark, 276)

14 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 178; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 315-317.

15 The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2007), 117.

16 Beth Felker Jones, *Faithful: A Theology of Sex* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 71.

NOTES

A dramatic landscape of the Negev Desert in Israel. The foreground is filled with a dense field of dark, angular rocks and boulders. In the middle ground, a steep, eroded cliff face shows distinct horizontal layers of sedimentary rock, with a prominent dark horizontal band. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds in shades of orange, pink, and purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall scene is arid and rugged.

NEGEV DESERT, ISRAEL



LESSON THREE

Mark 10:32-52

Greatness in the Kingdom

History is full of examples of leaders who achieved their position by coercion and manipulation. The church tends to emulate the world's leadership style. We hold up as models those in positions of power and influence—celebrities, athletes, musicians, politicians, business leaders—rather than those who have devoted themselves to 'lowly' service to others: the custodian with thirty years of faithful service, the aid worker in a Third World country, the volunteer gardener who keeps the church grounds in top shape, the caregiver who selflessly meets the needs of an Alzheimer's stricken spouse or parent.¹
Mark Strauss

STARTER

In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark studies from a secular viewpoint how Christianity went from a handful of people at the death of Jesus to the dominant religion of Western civilization by the middle of the fourth century. One of the reasons for Christianity's growth is the difference in the way Christians and pagans faced plagues in 165 and 251 AD. In each of these epidemics, one fourth to one third of the Roman Empire's population died. He writes:

At the height of the second great epidemic, around 260, in the Easter letter [...], Dionysius wrote a lengthy tribute to the heroic nursing efforts of local Christians, many of whom lost their lives while caring for others.

[...] But while the epidemic had not passed over the Christians, he suggests that pagans fared much worse: 'Its full impact fell on the heathen.'

Dionysius also offered an explanation of this mortality differential. Having noted at length how the Christian community nursed the sick and dying and even spared nothing in preparing the dead for proper burial, he wrote:

The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt [...].

[...] It seems highly unlikely that a bishop would write a pastoral letter full of false claims about things that his parishioners would know from direct observation. [...] Moreover, there is compelling evidence from pagan sources that this was characteristic Christian behavior. Thus, a century later, the emperor Julian launched a campaign to institute pagan charities in an effort to match the Christians.²

1. Why do you think the Christians stayed and nursed those who were sick with the plague at great risk to themselves while non-Christians did not?

2. Have you ever witnessed anyone do something that was truly selfless and at great risk to themselves? What did they do?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 10:32-52 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

If you get a sense of Deja-vu reading this week's passage, as Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection for a third time, you are not alone. His disciples, still somehow ignorant to Jesus' true mission, once again vie for the greatest positions in the Kingdom.

Jesus pulls them to the side and teaches them that greatness in the Kingdom is about serving and not about wielding power. Then a blind man, who sees Jesus' identity better than the twelve disciples or the crowds, is healed by Jesus and follows him. These events each reveal more about who Jesus is, the nature of his Messiahship, and of the Kingdom he is inaugurating.

The Third Passion Prediction

In the last chapters, Jesus has been traveling from the region of Galilee, where Jesus has spent most of his ministry thus far in Mark's account, down to Judea (10:1). Now Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem (10:32).³ Jesus pulls the twelve disciples aside and predicts for a third time his death and resurrection. The first two passion predictions only include Jesus' imminent death and resurrection (8:31; 9:31).

This third prediction goes into greater detail. Jesus will first be condemned by the Jewish religious leaders, then he will be handed over to the Gentiles, "who will spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise," (10:34). Jesus is greater than any of the Old Testament prophets who always proclaimed "thus says the Lord" before they prophesied, thus showing the authority by which they were prophesying.

Jesus' "direct knowledge of the future and his precise knowledge of the various details (vv. 33-34) portray him as more than a prophet."⁴ 10:32 states that Jesus is "leading the way," even though he knows exactly what awaits him in Jerusalem. All three of the passion predictions "[confirm] that the coming events are neither tragic nor unexpected. They are part of God's purpose and plan for the Messiah and the salvation he will accomplish."⁵ Jesus lives out his teaching about true greatness in the Kingdom.

True Greatness

Immediately after Jesus talks about his impending death and resurrection, James and John, aptly nicknamed the Sons of Thunder, request Jesus, "to do for us whatever we ask" (10:35b) – they are asking for a blank check. The request for pre-approval of whatever they are about to ask of Jesus shows that even James and John know that their request is inappropriate.⁶

Jesus deftly avoids answering their direct questions and asks them "What do you want me to do for you?" (10:36) which reveals their true motives. They ask to be at Jesus' right and left hand, Jesus' top advisers when he comes into his glory and becomes King when they enter Jerusalem. They correctly recognize that Jesus is the Messiah heading into the capital, Jerusalem, but they fail to recognize the kind of Messiah Jesus is when they decide to try to ride Jesus' coattails to positions of personal power and glory.

James Edwards writes "The brothers hope to honor Jesus while honoring themselves. How easily worship and discipleship are blended with self-interest; or worse, self-interest is masked as worship and discipleship."⁷

Jesus lets them know that they have no idea what they are asking, and then asks them rhetorical questions in response. "The cup" and "the baptism" are metaphors for Jesus' upcoming suffering and death. The metaphor of drinking "the cup" most often in the Old Testament refers to "suffering, especially in the context of divine judgment (Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17-23; Jer 25:15-29...)." ⁸ The idea of baptism signifying suffering is obscure, but "suffering is sometimes described as an overwhelming deluge of water (Ps 42:7| 69:1-2; Isa 43:2)." ⁹ James and John mistakenly claim that they can drink the cup that Jesus will drink and be baptized with the same baptism, but Jesus implies that James and John will in fact suffer for him (10:39-40).¹⁰

The other disciples become indignant when they hear about James and John's grab for power and glory. Jesus teaches the disciples once again about what it means to be great and a Kingdom leader (10:42-45). Worldly leaders use their power to lord over and dominate other people, but to be great in the Kingdom, a person has to be a servant and slave to all. James Edwards writes "the preeminent virtue of God's kingdom is not power, not even freedom, but service... The preeminence of service in the kingdom of God grows out of Jesus' teaching on love for one's neighbor, for service is love made tangible."¹¹

The climax of Jesus' paradoxical teaching on greatness in the Kingdom of God comes when he applies it to himself in Mark 10:45, when he says "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." Jesus, who is their rabbi, teacher, and Messiah, says that the reason why the "disciples should adopt the posture of servants and slaves not on the basis of ethical reasoning but because it is the posture of the Son of Man."¹² This verse also reveals the purpose of Jesus and how he came to serve, in order "to give his life as a ransom for many," (10:45).

There is much debate about what Jesus actually meant when he spoke these words. The word "ransom" has the connotation of paying the price to buy the release of a slave in order to set them free. Jesus giving his life "as a ransom for many" is an allusion to Isaiah's Suffering Servant passage (Isa 53:5, 6, 10, 11). Jesus saw his impending suffering, death, and resurrection as a substitute and ransom on behalf of humanity.¹³ So while Jesus' disciples fight to establish their own power and reputation, Jesus is walking the talk of being great in the Kingdom by serving humanity. Do we seek our own power and glory or do we seek to serve, love made tangible?

Blind Bartimaeus Sees Jesus

As Jesus and his disciples are leaving Jericho, Jesus heals a blind man named Bartimaeus. This is the last healing miracle in Mark and Bartimaeus is the only person healed in the Gospel of Mark whose name is given. The healing of Bartimaeus functions as a bookend for the middle section of Mark's Gospel (8:22-10:45), which is framed on either side by the healing of blind men. These two blind men see Jesus more clearly than the Jewish religious leaders and even Jesus' own disciples. Bartimaeus is sitting by the road begging, and shouts out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" when he hears Jesus pass by (10:47).

The title Son of David is somewhat surprising in the Gospel of Mark. Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus' birth which includes his descent from David, the greatest King in Israel's history. Mark does not include Jesus' birth or his genealogy and rarely uses this title for Jesus.¹⁴

Old Testament prophecy foretold of a Messiah from the line of David (2 Sam. 7:11-14), and the Jews are waiting eagerly for the fulfillment of this promise. Thus this title has strong Messianic overtones.

Many try to quiet this blind beggar, who they probably viewed as being too socially unimportant to interrupt Jesus' ascent to Jerusalem. Bartimaeus, not willing to be silenced, "shouted all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' (10:48). Bartimaeus is desperate; "The kingdom of heaven, [...] is not for the well-meaning but for the desperate. Bartimaeus is desperate, and his desperation is a doorway to faith."¹⁵ Jesus stops and calls Bartimaeus to him, making time to interact with a social outcast.

Jesus asks Bartimaeus the same question that he had just asked James and John "What do you want me to do for you?" (10:51).

With James and John, this question revealed their pride and hunger for power and glory; but with Bartimaeus it revealed that he was simply seeking to be healthy, to be able to see.¹⁶ Jesus simply announces "Go, your faith has healed you" (10:52). Jesus is not suggesting that the quantity of the man's faith led to his healing, but rather the object of his faith, Jesus, is what healed him. Perhaps Bartimaeus is healed spiritually as well, as he follows Jesus along the road (10:52).¹⁷ "Faith that does not lead to discipleship is not saving faith. Whoever asks of Jesus must be willing to follow Jesus [...] even on the uphill road to the cross."¹⁸

Group Questions

1. Is Jesus surprised by his eventual mistreatment in Jerusalem? How does Jesus' passion prediction (10:33-34) fit what happens to him?

2. What do James and John think is going to happen when they arrive in Jerusalem? What are they wanting from Jesus?

3. Jesus contrasts the leadership of the world with leadership in God's Kingdom. How are they different? From this, what can be gleaned about the nature and values of the Kingdom?

4. What does it mean to be great in the Kingdom of God? How does Jesus embody this?

5. What is the difference in motive between James and John and Bartimaeus when answering Jesus' question "what do you want me to do for you?" (10:36, 51)

6. How does Bartimaeus model discipleship?

7. What two aspects of Jesus' Messiahship does this week's scripture point to?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. Where do you see both the world's style of leadership and the Kingdom style of leadership? Which form of leadership - worldly or Kingdom - does Waterstone emulate?

2. What impact has "Kingdom leadership" had on your career and your definition of success? How has it shaped your view of how you use power?

3. The crowds try to silence Bartimaeus and keep him from Jesus but he persisted in crying out to Jesus. How persistent is your faith in Jesus when life seems overwhelming?

4. If Jesus asked "What can I do for you?" what would be your response? What would that reveal about your heart?

Group Prayer

Throughout history, the church has prayed along with Bartimaeus in what is known as the Jesus Prayer.

All: "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me a sinner."
Take turns saying aloud prayers praising Jesus for who he is.

All: "Most merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
In thought, word, and deed,
By what we have done,
And by what we have left undone.
We have not loved thee with our whole heart;
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and humbly repent.
For the sake of your son Jesus Christ,
Have mercy on us and forgive us;
That we may delight in your will,
And walk in your ways,
To the glory of your Name. Amen."¹⁹

Take turns saying aloud prayers thanking Jesus for his mercy.

All: "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me a sinner."

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- 1 Strauss, Mark, 463.
 - 2 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 82-83.
 - 3 One always goes "up to Jerusalem" as it sits about 2,500 feet above sea level, roughly 1,500 feet higher than the surrounding Jordan valley.
 - 4 Stein, Mark, 480.
 - 5 Strauss, Mark, 453; Stein, Mark, 480.
 - 6 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 321; Stein, Mark, 484; Strauss, Mark, 454.
 - 7 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 322.
 - 8 Strauss, Mark, 455.
 - 9 Strauss, Mark, 455.
 - 10 Strauss, Mark, 456; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 323.
 - 11 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 326.
 - 12 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 326.
 - 13 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 327-328; Stein, Mark, 488; Strauss, Mark, 458.
 - 14 Strauss, Mark, 468.
 - 15 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 330.
 - 16 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 330-331.
 - 17 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 331; Stein, Mark, 497.
 - 18 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 331.
 - 19 *The Anglican Service Book*, (1979), 247.

NOTES

THE DEAD SEA, ISRAEL



LESSON FOUR

Mark 11:1-25

Religious Leaders Found Fruitless

The Messiah was popularly expected to purge Jerusalem and the temple of Gentiles, aliens, and foreigners [...]. Jesus' action, however, is exactly the reverse. He does not clear the temple of Gentiles, but for them.¹

James Edwards

STARTER

British philosopher and atheist Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) in his essay "Why I am Not a Christian," finds that Jesus' character is defective and immoral because of some of the things Jesus did, including incidents from Mark 11:1-25, this week's passage. Russell writes:

There is the instance of the Gadarene swine [Mark 5:1-20], where it certainly was not very kind to the pigs to put the devils into them and make them rush down the hill into the sea. You must remember that He was omnipotent, and He could have made the devils simply go away; but He chose to send them into the pigs. Then there is the curious story of the fig tree, which always rather puzzled me. You remember what happened about the fig tree. 'He was hungry; and seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, He came if haply He might find anything thereon; and when He came to it He found nothing but leaves, for the time of figs was not yet. And Jesus answered and said unto it: 'No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever'... and Peter ... saith unto Him: 'Master, behold the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away.' This is a very curious story, because it was not the right time of year for figs, and you really could not blame the tree. I cannot feel that either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue Christ stands quite as high as some other people known to history. I think I should put Buddha and Socrates above him in those respects.²

Russell is correct in that this is indeed a "curious story." Some of Jesus' behaviors indeed rub up against the tightly held value of "nicety." However, in these seemingly strange incidents, Jesus is teaching us about the holiness and goodness of God. And it is this God that is worthy of our trust.

1. While for the most part American society likes Jesus (as a great moral teacher, for instance) more than Christianity, what are some of Jesus' teachings or actions that offend our society? Are there any of Jesus' teachings or actions that offend you?

2. Think of a time when you misinterpreted the actions or words of a family member or friend. What helped resolve your misinterpretation?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 11:1-25 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

Mark 11 begins the concluding third of Mark's account of Jesus' ministry, as Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last week of his life. Jesus casts aside the Messianic secret as he enters Jerusalem triumphantly, publicly revealing his identity as Messiah. Mark then sandwiches a bizarre episode of Jesus cursing and withering of an unfruitful fig tree around Jesus' clearing of the temple, symbolizing Jesus' judgment against the Jewish religious authorities.

Anticlimactic Entry

For the first time in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus approaches Jerusalem. While Jesus up to this point has tried to keep his identity as the Messiah a secret, his approach to Jerusalem is a way of him claiming to be the Messiah even if the crowds do not fully understand what his actions mean. As Jesus and his disciples approach Jerusalem, he sends two disciples with very specific details, to acquire an unriden colt (11:1-6). It is unclear whether Jesus prearranged to borrow the colt from its owner, or if Jesus uses divine insight in directing his disciples.³ Either way “the scene suggests that everything is proceeding as planned and Jesus is fully in charge of the circumstances.”⁴

Details in the story have messianic connotations, including that (1) pilgrims heading to Jerusalem for festivals always walked, and this is the only instance recorded of Jesus riding on an animal; (2) Zechariah 9:9 prophesies that the Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on a colt; (3) commandeering animals was the prerogative of kings; and (4) it is similar to both King Solomon’s coronation (1 Kings 1:32-48) and King Jehu’s coronation (2 Kings 9:1-13).⁵

As Jesus rides the colt, the crowds spread their cloaks and branches from the nearby fields on the road before Jesus, rolling out for him the first-century red carpet (11:8). The crowds are shouting “Hosanna,” which means “Save now!”, a common cry of praise. The crowds also shout “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” from Psalm 118:26, which is one of the Psalms of ascent that pilgrims would recite as they approached Jerusalem for Passover.⁶

The second blessing in 11:10 is not from one of the Psalms but it parallels the first blessing. The crowd likely missed the messianic connotations of Jesus’ approach but they saw their shouts of acclamation as honoring of a prophet from Galilee (Matt. 21:11) and not even Jesus’ disciples understood what Jesus was up to until later (John 12:16).⁷ This story seems as if it is a building crescendo but ends anticlimactically. Jesus arrives, heads to the temple, looks around and then leaves because it is late (11:11) but he will be back in the morning.

The Fig Tree and Temple Clearing

The next morning, Jesus and his disciples leave Bethany to head back into Jerusalem. Jesus is hungry, spies a fig tree in the distance, and investigates if the tree has any fruit on it. When Jesus finds the tree fruitless, Jesus curses the tree, the only miracle of destruction in the Gospels, even though Mark notes “it was not the season for figs” (11:13).

This story has confused and disturbed many throughout history. However, is Jesus really throwing a childish temper tantrum in this story? To correctly understand this story, there are three important notes. First, Mark has recorded many times Jesus’ anger and frustration, and makes zero mention of Jesus being upset or angry in this passage. This implies that Jesus being angry was not the reason for his cursing the tree (11:12-14).

Second, in March and April fig trees produce fig knops, pieces of fruit which are edible if not exactly tasty, before they produce leaves and then later on produce ripe figs. So when Mark notes that Jesus approached the tree “in leaf” and did not find anything to eat on it, “it is a tree with the signs of fruit but with no fruit.”⁸

Third, this story of the cursing (11:12-14) and withering (11:20-21) of the fig tree are sandwiched around the story of Jesus clearing the temple. Jesus uses his interaction with the barren fig tree as dramatic display of prophecy against the Temple and the religious leaders of Israel.

Jesus then enters Jerusalem and the temple courts, this time during the day. Jesus famously drives out people using the Court of Gentiles in the temple as a marketplace and overturns tables of the money exchanges. Markets were set up for people traveling to Jerusalem for religious festivals. The pilgrims needed a place to buy their sacrifices (sheep, doves, meat, oil) once they arrived in Jerusalem.

Why did Jesus clear the temple and start flipping tables? Jesus, as he is causing this ruckus, teaches by quoting Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, saying "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of robbers.'" (11:17). Jesus was not upset that these markets existed, but that this one was in the Court of Gentiles where the Priests could earn money instead of allowing gentiles space to worship.

The temple consisted of concentric circles of increasing levels of exclusion. The outer circle was the Court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews could worship God; they were not allowed to enter any further into the temple or they would be killed.⁹ So this market was in the only place where gentiles were allowed to pray to and worship God.

Many in Jesus' day hoped that the Messiah would expel all of the non-Jewish people from Israel, Jerusalem, and especially the temple. This is in direct contrast to the Old Testament where God expected his people to be a blessing to all people that they might know God, and the temple was to be a place where all nations could worship God (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 2:2-24; 66:18-20).¹⁰ Instead of expelling the Gentiles, Jesus expels those who were keeping the Gentiles from being able to worship God.

With the temple clearing being sandwiched between the cursing and the withering of the fruitless fig tree, this is not so much a cleansing of the temple but Jesus symbolically judging and predicting its destruction. Israel's religious leaders, who are supposed to be bearing spiritual fruit, have been found to be acting 'religious' but are in fact spiritually barren and so are condemned by Jesus.¹¹ Implicit in this story is that disciples of Jesus are called to be bearing spiritual fruit in and out of season (Gal. 5:22-23).

Faith and Prayer

Jesus then teaches about the power of faith, and that even things that are impossible for humans to accomplish are possible for God. Faith that does not waver is often a prerequisite for miracles in the Gospel of Mark. Verse 24 is not, as some believe, a promise that God is some cosmic genie, who, if we just have enough confidence, has to give us our every self-centered desire.

To the believer, Jesus is king, and they owe Jesus their complete allegiance: "Our requests must therefore be according to his will and his kingdom purposes (Matt 6:33). Even Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, prayed, 'Not what I want but what you want' (Mark 14:36). The Lord's model prayer summarizes well how we should pray: 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt 6:10)."¹² Additionally, in Mark 11:25 Jesus teaches that those desiring forgiveness from God must forgive those who have trespassed against them (see also Matt. 6:15). Followers of Jesus are to pray expectantly for God's will to be done on earth and are to be a people who extend forgiveness and mercy.

Group Questions

1. What does Mark see as the significance of Jesus entering Jerusalem? What did the crowds think of Jesus entering Jerusalem? What did they think he was there to do?

2. Jesus so far in the story has been discreet, telling people to not talk about his healings, but now he seems to be drawing attention to himself. Why do you suppose this is?

3. Why does Mark “sandwich” the clearing of the temple between the beginning and end of the fig tree episode? What do each of these stories mean?

4. Why does Jesus clear the temple? Where were the money changers and those selling doves doing business? What are the two scriptures that Jesus quotes and what do they have to do with all of this?

5. How did the religious elite react to Jesus clearing the temple? Why are they so upset at him?

6. What does Jesus mean in his teaching on faith and prayer in vv. 22-25? What are some other of Jesus' teachings on prayer? (Matthew 6:9-15) Is Jesus promising that God will give us anything and everything we want? (1 John 5:14)

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. Jesus rode into Jerusalem as the long-awaited Messiah and King. What does it mean for Jesus to be Lord over your life?

2. Are there people today that we as Christians exclude from "access" to God in our community of believers?

3. What does it mean for us to bear spiritual fruit today? How are you at bearing spiritual fruit in this season of life? (List of spiritual fruit: Galatians 5:22-23) Where could you grow?

Group Prayer

In Mark 11:1-11 Jesus rides into Jerusalem as King.

In Matthew 6:9-13 Jesus teaches his disciples what is known as the Lord's Prayer. It says "your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Spend a few minutes praying in your small group asking for the God's Kingdom to come and his will to be done in global, national and local events.

God, may your Kingdom come in _____.

1 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 340.

2 Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian, and other essays on religion and related subjects*, ed. by Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 10-11.

3 Arguing for Jesus' divine foresight: Strauss, *Mark*, 480; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 336. Arguing for Jesus prearranging: Stein, *Mark*, 502.

4 Strauss, *Mark*, 480-481.

5 Strauss, *Mark*, 480-481; Stein, *Mark*, 505; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 336.

6 Originally this blessing was understood to be a blessing on pilgrims approaching the Temple and not understood through a messianic lens, as Mark wanted his audience to understand it. Stein, *Mark*, 507.

7 Stein, *Mark*, 506.

8 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 339-340; Strauss, *Mark*, 491; Stein, *Mark*, 514.

9 The next ring in is the Court of Women, where Jewish women could worship, inside that was the Court of Israel for Jewish men, then was the Court of Priests for the Priests, and then the Holy of Holies for the High Priest only one day a year. Strauss, *Mark*, 494.

10 Stein, *Mark*, 517.

11 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 345-346; Strauss, *Mark*, 495; Stein, *Mark*, 522.

12 Strauss, *Mark*, 501.

NOTES



NEGEV DESERT, ISRAEL

LESSON FIVE

Mark 11:27 – 12:44

Jesus Vs. Religious Leaders

For the Pharisee the emphasis is always on personal effort and achievement. The gospel of grace emphasizes the primacy of God's love. The Pharisee savors impeccable conduct; the child [who has never experienced anything but love and who tries to do her best because she is loved] delights in the relentless tenderness of God.¹

Brennan Manning

STARTER

In the rotunda of the Capitol hangs John Trumbull's, "The Declaration of Independence, Fourth of July 1776."

This painting has been seen by more people than any American painting, and almost nothing about the painting is accurate.

America's founders did not start to sign the Declaration until August 2nd, and only a part of the Congress was present then. They kept coming back in the months that followed to sign the document.

The chairs are wrong, the doors are in the wrong place, there were no heavy draperies, and the display of military banners on the back wall is a figment of Trumbull's imagination. What is accurate about it are the faces. Every single one of the forty-seven men in that painting is an identifiable and thus accountable individual. That is what Trumbull wanted. The signing of the Declaration was not a decision handed down by a czar or a king; it was the decision of a citizen Congress acting freely.²

In our text this week, we come to a famous saying of Jesus that is the closest thing to a political statement he would make:

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17).

The Pharisees (against Roman political power) and the Herodians (supporting Roman political power) are trying to smoke Jesus out to see what party he supports. Jesus resists political simplicity. The people want a yes or no answer: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we or shouldn't we?" Jesus will not do what they ask him to do which is to give a simple answer. When Jesus talks about our relationship with him, he is incredibly clear: Follow Me. However, when he is asked about our relationship to the state and politics, it is a balanced and nuanced answer - a kind of both/and. Perhaps the allegiance of a human heart is much more weight than any political party can carry.



1. How many state capitals could you name? Have you ever visited the Capitol building in Washington, D.C.? Share some of your impressions.

2. Deep down, why do you think politics gets people so riled up? Why can the disagreements be so divisive? How do you navigate the intense feelings of our political environment?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 11:27 – 12:44 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

Questioning of Jesus' Authority

Mark 11:27-12:44 depicts another series of controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders. The religious leaders ask Jesus a string of trick questions, hoping he will fall sway to their devious ploys and answer in ways that give them an excuse for arresting him.

This is the case in 11:27-11:33 when the religious leaders question Jesus. Angry that Jesus is acting like God, they demand to know the source of his authority. Jesus responds to their claims with a question of his own: "John's baptism – was it from heaven, or of human origin?" (11:30). The religious leaders know that either response they give is dangerous. Either they admit they are wrong and that John is truly a prophet worthy of believing and following, or they risk provoking a crowd who did believe John to be a prophet. Trapped in their own snare, the religious leaders are stumped. The religious leaders cannot give Jesus an answer, so neither does he answer their question. Jesus evades a discussion with people ultimately "unwilling" to accept the truth about who he is.³

Parable of the Tenants

In the parable of the tenants, Jesus describes a landowner who rents his property to tenants. It was customary at the time for tenants working a landlord's property to give a share of the produce grown on the land to the landlord as part of the rental contract (12:2).

Likely desiring to be released from this burden, the tenants were all too eager to confront the various representatives coming to collect this share of produce. When the landlord's son came to the farm, however, the tenants likely assumed the landowner had died.

At that time land was passed from father to son. In the event that the son was out of the picture, the individuals currently occupying the land would inherit the property. Assuming the landowner had died, the tenants knew that killing the son meant they could inherit the property. The tenants kill the son shamefully, not giving him a proper burial but tossing his body off the property (12:8).

Yet instead of receiving the land, they receive judgment for their behavior.⁴

The various characters in this parable are significant. The series of servants sent to collect their owners' share of produce are reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets God sent to the Israelites to call them back to himself. Often these prophets were mocked and scorned rather than heeded. The landowner's son represents Jesus, someone sent on God's behalf. As the son was killed, so will Jesus be killed by the ones he came to save.

The tenants represent the religious leaders, those in charge of the land who vehemently reject the servants (prophets) and son (Jesus). This rejection is not without consequence: "the rejection of the son represented a total rejection of the owner."⁵ In repudiating Jesus, the religious leaders scorn God himself. Knowing they are implicated in this parable, the religious leaders are irate. It is only the fear of the crowds that prevented them from arresting Jesus (12:12).

Paying Taxes to Caesar

Again the religious leaders approach Jesus in an effort to “catch him in his words” (12:13). Prefacing their question with a flowery false homage to Jesus’ integrity (which is ironic as this was the very thing they sought to undermine), they pose a question about taxes: should taxes be paid to Rome or not?

Taxes were controversial in first-century Israel. Paying taxes essentially represented a submission to the authority and rule of Rome. Many Jews felt oppressed by the Roman government, and had little desire to contribute to this systemic oppression. On the other hand, refusing to pay taxes was a declaration of insurrection. The religious leaders know that either way Jesus answers the question will trap him; he can’t win with this question, they plot! Jesus can either identify as a political zealot, or reveal he is in cahoots with Rome. Either response gives the religious leaders more reason to arrest and kill Jesus.⁶

Yet again, Jesus masterfully evades their ploy. Refusing to answer in a way that will shift his mission from being about the Kingdom of God to being a political campaign, Jesus simply declares:

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (12:17). Jesus simultaneously does not condemn the governmental ruling authorities, while also not commanding unconditioned allegiance. Just as a Roman denarius is stamped with Caesar’s image, so humans are “stamped” with God’s image: “because [people] bear the image of God they owe their total allegiance to him.”⁷ A person’s first allegiance is to God, and then to governing authorities.

Sadducees & Resurrection

Controversies continue as the Sadducees approach Jesus with another devious question. The Sadducees were an elite, wealthy group of religious leaders and scholars, well-educated in Torah law and the Scriptures (which we now know as the Old Testament) who also rejected any notion of the resurrection from the dead. Most Jews at the time believed in some sort of resurrection, so for the Sadducees to deny this idea put them in the minority. Out of this rejection, the Sadducees pose a question to Jesus about the resurrection. The situation they pose is a hypothetical and nearly comical one, meant to point fun at the resurrection and expose what they see as the ridiculousness of it.⁸

Jesus' response to the Sadducees exposes their lack of understanding about the Scriptures and the power of God (12:24). Though Sadducees are experts on the Scriptures, Jesus claims here that they do not know of what they speak. First Jesus counters the Sadducees' limited and finite view of the resurrection. In vs. 25, Jesus makes the case that the nature of resurrected life will be so entirely different from the experience of life as it is known here on earth. Resurrected life will be overwhelmingly good but also very different, so fathoming what that will be like is impossible: "present earthly experience is entirely insufficient to forecast divine heavenly realities."⁹ Thus speculating on notions of whether or not there will be marriage in heaven misses the point entirely. Besides knowing resurrected life will be defined by glorious "communion with God," there is very little that can be known about the nature of resurrected life.¹⁰

In 12:26-27, Jesus reminds the Sadducees of the promises God made to the patriarchs. However, if the patriarchs are now dead, as the Sadducees would assert, and are not alive in God, this is essentially saying that the promises of God are finite and limited, and expire when humans die. Jesus rejects this idea, asserting instead that the power of God reaches beyond the grave and beyond the limited duration of the lifetime of a human person. The Sadducees fail to recognize the scope of God's power.¹¹

Greatest Commandment

The religious leader with whom Jesus dialogues in this section is one who starts to understand the Kingdom of God (12:34), resulting in a favorable response from Jesus, one of the rare instances in Mark of a religious leader viewed positively.¹²

In response to the question regarding the most important commandment, Jesus responds first with the Shema (Deut. 6:4), a revered declaration stating the oneness of God repeated by the nation of Israel throughout its history. This is followed by the command to love God with all of one's being and to love one's neighbor as themselves (12:30-31). It is significant that Jesus begins his response first with the Shema, a declaration deeply rooted in the heart of Judaism. Jesus is not pulling these commands out of thin air, but is rather rooting himself in the very history of Israel. Jesus does not reject the Torah, but reframes it.¹³

It is also significant that the commands Jesus gives involve both loving God and one another. These two commands are intricately related; loving God and loving others is a package deal! One cannot exist without the other. Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm writes that loving God and others "together . . . comprise the heart of faithfulness, so that religion is a matter of divine and human relationships, of personal devotion and public consequence."¹⁴

Jesus, Messiah and Son of David

Jesus then teaches about the nature of his Messiahship. Traditionally within Judaism it was understood that the Messiah would come from the line of David. Here Jesus clarifies how he fits into this lineage. Yet Jesus here is also claiming divinity. Commentator James Edwards writes:

The Messiah will indeed be a recognized descendant of David, but he will surpass David's lineage. "Son of David" may assert certain truths about the Messiah, but it falls short in essential ways of capturing his identity. The quotation from Psalm 110 is used here... as a description of [Jesus'] transcendent status, sitting at God's honored and authoritative right...the Messiah is not simply David's son; he is God's Son.¹⁵

God and the Messiah will rule together, which is why David (in the Psalms) shows them reverence. Jesus is both a Messiah of Davidic lineage and divine Lord, Son of God.

Teachers of the Law and the Widow's Sacrificial Gift

Jesus describes a widow's sacrificial offering immediately after offering a rebuke of the ostentatious religious leaders. Religious leaders at the time were prominent members of society, a status they likely enjoyed. For many, Jesus observes, this prestige had become consuming, or a goal of their faith. Seeking the approval of others trumped true, authentic devotion to God for many religious leaders.¹⁶

The next story of a widow's sincere devotion contrasts sharply with the description of the religious leaders, further exposing their hypocrisy and filth. Instead of using a position to achieve social status and prominence within the community like the religious leaders are doing, the widow Jesus observes in 12:41-44 gives all she has to God.¹⁷

Jesus watches as the widow places two small coins into the offering. The coins the widow gives are very small, and are the smallest currency that were made; what she gives hardly counts for anything monetarily. Yet the widow gives anyway. Because the widow does not have wealth to trust in, giving all she has to God represents a tangible expression of her trust in God. This sacrifice is what Jesus praises: "For Jesus, the value of a gift is not the amount given, but the cost to the giver."¹⁸ The widow's gift represents a "total commitment to God."¹⁹ Discipleship to Jesus should be marked by sacrificial giving, a model which Jesus himself demonstrates ultimately on the cross.

Group Questions

1. What are the five different ways religious leaders try to trap Jesus?
2. What is the meaning of the parable of the tenants (12:1-12)? Why are the religious leaders so infuriated by this parable?
3. What are the various ways that different groups of people in this section respond to Jesus (12:12; 12:17; 12:34; 12:37)?
4. How did Jesus evade the trap of the Pharisees and Herodians in 12:13-17? What would have been the danger if Jesus had answered to either pay or not pay taxes to Rome?

5. Why does Jesus get so frustrated at the Sadducees for in 12:18-27? How does Jesus expose their inaccurate readings of Scripture and misunderstandings of the power of God?

6. What do the 2 greatest commandments (12:29-31) reveal about the heart of God?

7. What does Jesus observe when watching the place where the offerings were placed? Why does he praise the widow (12:41-44)?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. The widow in 12:41-44 is actively trusting in God by giving sacrificially. Does your giving reflect a trust in God or a trust in your own finances? What would it look like to actively trust God entirely with everything you own?

2. Jesus identifies the two greatest commandments as to 1) to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength"; and 2) to "love your neighbor as yourself." How are you doing at loving God with all of who you are, and loving others as yourself?

Group Prayer

Share prayer requests with your group and spend time praying for one another. Pray also for the needs of our local community, nation, and the world.

Leader, close with this Psalm of David.

Psalm 108 (NLT)

A song. A psalm of David.

- 1 My heart is confident in you, O God;
no wonder I can sing your praises with all my heart!
 - 2 Wake up, lyre and harp!
I will wake the dawn with my song.
 - 3 I will thank you, Lord, among all the people.
I will sing your praises among the nations.
 - 4 For your unfailing love is higher than the heavens.
Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.
 - 5 Be exalted, O God, above the highest heavens.
May your glory shine over all the earth.
- Amen.

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- 1 Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 86.
 - 2 Picture of the painting from <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/trumbull.html>.
 - 3 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 353; 351-354; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 204; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 414.
 - 4 Bock, *Mark*, 301; 303; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 205; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 357; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 419.
 - 5 Bock, *Mark*, 303; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 419.
 - 6 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 363; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 423; Bock, *Mark*, 306; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 208.
 - 7 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 425; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 364
 - 8 Also laden in this anecdote the Sadducees pose is an inherent disregard for women. The poor woman in the anecdote is passed around from brother to brother, showing little care for her as an individual, revealing that "The Sadducees are more committed to the notion of patriarchal succession than they are willing to acknowledge God's power to overturn the forces of sin and death" (Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 211); Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 63-64; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 366-367.
 - 9 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 368; Bock, *Mark*, 310.
 - 10 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 428.
 - 11 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 211; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 428; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 369.
 - 12 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 369.
 - 13 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 374; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 432.
 - 14 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 213; Bock, *Mark*, 313.
 - 15 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 377.
 - 16 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 440-441; Bock, *Mark*, 315-316.
 - 17 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 218; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 442; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 378.
 - 18 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 381; Bock, *Mark*, 317.
 - 19 William Lane writes, "the call to the gospel is a call for absolute surrender to God and total trust in him" (*The Gospel According to Mark*, 443); Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 382.

NOTES



THE DEAD SEA, ISRAEL

LESSON SIX

Mark 13:1-37

Watch Out!

Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith;
be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.
The Apostle Paul, 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

STARTER

Mark 13 has often been abused and wrongly understood to be offering clues for people to decipher in order to figure out the exact date of Jesus' return. The following is from a Washington Post article by Russel Moore, the President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, about the prediction that September 23, 2017 was going to be the end of the world:

Here we are again. News reports are abuzz with a "Christian numerologist" suggesting that Sept. 23, 2017, is the fixed date for the end of the world. [...]

But there are a couple of reasons we should pay no attention to this prediction. The first reason is summed up in the words "Christian numerologist." The second, and more important, reason is that this sort of doomsday speculation has little to do with religion and everything to do with marketing.

The first market for this sort of prophecy-as-publicity is outside the Christian church. One would be hard-pressed to find a church or a significant gathering of Christians who buy into the Sept. 23 date-setting. [...]

Beyond that, though, there is the very real problem with doomsday hucksterism within American religion. [...] Usually proponents will just note how interesting it is that Bible prophecies about signs in the heavens and earthquakes just happen to sound like earthquakes and hurricanes and solar eclipses in the news right now. Many of them will then have books for sale about how to discern these times, and some even have for sale, conveniently enough, freeze-dried packets of lima beans one can purchase for one's post-Armageddon bomb shelter.

This is not new. The 20th century saw much of this — especially in the 1970s and 1980s, which many promised would be the "terminal generation." [...]

Followers would wait, in vain, for these people to apologize for failed prophecies; they would just move right on to the next one — with books and videos and kits all available for a short time only at these low, low, rates.

None of this has anything to do with biblical Christianity. Jesus, and then his apostles, told us to expect a day of final judgment, to look for the return of Christ to our present reality of space and time.

[...] The Bible verses the prophecy-mavens use to fix their dates — wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, and so on — are spoken of by Jesus as the exact opposite. When you see these things, Jesus said, “see that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet” (Matt. 24:6). [...]

There’s a high cost to those who would, contrary to Jesus’ explicit command, fix dates and seasons to the end. When many view the world as one constant marketing scheme, those who use the gospel for such ends leave in their wake cynicism and disillusionment. Sometimes people reject the good news of Christianity while never knowing that what they are turning aside isn’t, in fact, anything that Jesus or those he sent said at all.

[...] History could, of course, come to consummation on Sept. 23, or on Sept. 24 or 1 million years from now, on Feb. 29. I don’t know. Neither do you. And we’re in good company. Jesus said that he himself, in his human nature, did not know the timing of his return, but only the Father (Mark 13:32).

One thing is for sure. When that day does arrive, we will not need numerology to figure out if it’s here. Jesus will be visible and indisputable. And he will not be selling anything.¹

1. September 23, 2017, the date that some predicted would be the end of the world, was the day of the solar eclipse. Were you able to watch the eclipse? If so, describe who you were with, where you were, and what you were doing to watch it.

2. How have you seen people try to hijack Christianity to make money?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 13:1-37 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

After Jesus' arguments with the religious leaders in the temple, Jesus leaves the temple for the last time and predicts its complete destruction. As he sits on the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem, one of his disciples asks "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?" (13:4). Jesus' answer has been puzzled and argued over ever since, but its main theme is evident, followers of Jesus are called to watchfulness and faithfulness.

The Not-Yet Signs (13:5-13)

Jesus first gives a non-answer to the disciples' question of when the temple will be destroyed in 13:5-13. Jesus then gives the disciples five "not-yet signs," he says "Such things must happen, but the end is still to come," (13:7). "The disciples—and believers since—want to know the future, but Jesus directs them unflinchingly to the present: 'Watch out that no one deceives you.' Beginning in v. 5 and continuing throughout the chapter, there is a running admonition against future speculation at the expense of present obedience."²

The five signs that the end of Jerusalem is not-yet are: (1) messianic pretenders (13:5-6), (2) wars and rumors of wars (13:7), (3) earthquakes and famines (13:8), (4) persecution of believers by governments and families (13:9, 11-13), and (5) "the gospel must first be preached to all nations" (13:10).

The first four not-yet signs are unquestionably fulfilled between Jesus' death and the destruction of the temple (30-70 AD). Both Acts 5:36 and Jewish historian Josephus mention the false messiah Theudas, and Josephus mentions others.³ There was sporadic fighting in Judea before the Jewish revolt kicked off in 67, which precipitated the temple's destruction. Pompeii and Laodicea both suffered massive earthquakes in the early 60's, and Judea and other parts of the Roman empire faced a serious famine in the late 40's (Acts 11:28).⁴ The book of Acts is filled with stories of the early church being persecuted. Even the fifth not-yet sign seems to have been fulfilled by 70 AD because the gospel had been preached throughout the Roman empire, which was all of the known world (Rom. 10:18; Col. 1:6, 23; 1 Tim. 3:16).⁵

All five of these not-yet signs have recurred throughout history, but Jesus ends this section with a promise, "the one who stands firm to the end will be saved" (13:13). Disciples are to not be distracted by messianic pretenders, wars, natural disasters, and persecution, but are called to daily live out their faith, no matter the circumstances. Discipleship does not exempt believers from troubles and sorrows, but calls disciples to rely on the promises of God through those troubles and sorrows.

Sign Indicating the Destruction of Jerusalem (13:14-23)

After Jesus gives the disciples the five not-yet signs, he gives them the sign for the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple: "When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong [...] then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains," (13:14). The 'abomination that causes desolation' has sparked much contention throughout church history. This phrase is an allusion to Daniel 9:27, 11:31 and 12:11, where Daniel predicts the desecration of the temple by Antiochus IV in 167 BC.

Antiochus was a Seleucid ruler, who Josephus says built a pagan altar on God's altar and sacrificed pigs on it, resulting in the Maccabean revolt.⁶ Conjecture among scholars abound regarding what Jesus meant by this phrase but Mark expected his readers to be able to figure it out themselves. His editorial comment "let the reader understand" in 13:14 indicates this.

When believers in Judea saw this sign, whatever exactly it was, they were to flee Jerusalem into the surrounding mountains, because Jerusalem's destruction was at hand. Jesus' command shows how dire and urgent of a situation it is (13:15-16).⁷

Jesus turns from the urgency to flee Jerusalem to the overwhelming hardship and suffering that will result. Due to the immediate context of Jesus' warning to flee, 13:17-18 refer to the difficulties faced by those escaping Jerusalem.⁸ In 13:19 Jesus uses prophetic and slightly hyperbolic language about the suffering of those that find themselves inside of Jerusalem when it is destroyed.

Jesus predicted correctly; the destruction of Jerusalem was indeed horrific. Josephus described the destruction of Jerusalem in great detail: "Outside the city the Romans crucified so many Jews that they ran out of wood for crosses. Inside there was extreme infighting, murder, famine, disease and even cannibalism."⁹ In 13:20 Jesus states that the Lord will actually restrain the destruction of Jerusalem some, on behalf of the believers still in the city at the time.

Jesus concludes his foretelling of the destruction of Jerusalem by once again warning his disciples to “be on your guard” (13:23) about false messiahs and prophets (13:21-22). James Edwards writes “Jesus warns his disciples and the church not to be distracted from obedience to the suffering Son of Man, neither by ingenious speculations nor by signs and wonders.”¹⁰

The Coming of the Son of Man (13:24-27)

The leap Jesus makes from talking about the destruction of Jerusalem (13:14-23) to “the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory,” (13:26), has often baffled readers.

Robert Stein writes:

For Mark, the events of 13:14–23 and 24–27 are intimately associated, and it is unlikely that he saw a great gap of time between them. They are intimately associated in that they are part of the same great divine act of history. This includes Jesus’s coming, ministry, death, and resurrection, which bring the kingdom of God; the divine judgment on Jerusalem in AD 70; and the [return] of the Son of Man, which brings history to its conclusion and goal.¹¹

Events that are millennia apart may be identified together in prophetic literature because of the events’ relationship to the end times or the history of salvation. Prophets frequently prophesy from a perspective that is often compared to a person viewing mountains from a great distance. From that person’s perspective, two mountains might look like they are right next to one another, but in reality are far apart. Mark Strauss writes, “From Mark’s perspective, the destruction of Jerusalem is direct vindication of God’s saving work through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah and also the precursor and preview of the consummation of the Kingdom of God at the [return of Jesus]. From his limited vantage point, these two latter events appear together.”¹²

Even though Jesus will be executed as a criminal, he will be publicly vindicated when “people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory,” (13:26). When the victorious and glorified suffering servant comes, he will also vindicate those who trust him even through persecution and suffering; “This preview of the future ought not lure us to calculate when Christ will return, nor to fear what will happen, but to know that he will come to claim his own.”¹³

Jerusalem’s Imminent Destruction (13:28-31)

Jesus then teaches a lesson using an analogy of a fig tree, when it sprouts leaves in late spring summer is near, as seeing “these things” points to the nearness of the destruction of Jerusalem (13:28-31).¹⁴ The two references to “these things” (13:29-30) indicate that Jesus is referencing the disciples’ first question from back in v. 4 and the sign of “the abomination that causes desolation” (13:14), referring to the destruction of the temple.¹⁵ This also makes sense of Jesus’ reference that “this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” in 13:30 as the destruction of the temple occurred within the generation of the disciples.¹⁶

The Unknown Time of Jesus’ Return (13:32-37)

Jesus shifts from talking about the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem within one generation, to the unknown time of the Son of Man’s return. Jesus warns against speculating about the exact timing of his return, stating “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father,” (13:32). It is ridiculous for people, who are only human, to claim to know the date of Jesus’ return when he, the Son of God, does not even know.

Instead of hypothesizing about his return he instructs disciples “Be on guard! Be alert!” (13:33). Jesus gives an analogy that as a doorkeeper of an estate is to keep watch for the owner’s return, whenever that might be; disciples are to be alert and keeping watch for Jesus’ return (13:34-37). Again Jesus commands urgent watchfulness: “be ready; be prepared. Be about the business of the kingdom so that whenever the end comes, however unexpectedly, you are ready.”¹⁷ The whole purpose of Jesus’ teaching in Mark 13 is not to give an end-time timeline, but to exhort his disciples, that, despite seemingly chaotic circumstances, we are called to faithful and obedient living in the present.

Group Questions

1. In the first century, what would be the significance of Jerusalem’s (and specifically the temple’s) destruction?

2. Why does Jesus give the 5 not-yet signs before finally giving the sign for the destruction of Jerusalem?

3. Why would Jesus warn the disciples twice of deceivers and false messiahs? (vv. 5-6; 22)

4. What are the promises that Jesus makes to believers in this passage? How would have those promises specifically been a comfort to believers in those first decades after Jesus' death and resurrection?

5. What does Jesus know about the timing of his Second Coming?

6. What does Jesus command his disciples to do in this passage?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. How do the promises that Jesus makes to believers in this passage give you comfort?

2. What are the ways that we can pray for believers around the world who are being persecuted for their faith?

3. How does the fact that Jesus stated that no one, including himself, knows the time of his second coming, except the Father (v. 32), affect the way you engage with other believers when talking about Christ's return?

4. What does it look like for you to "Be on guard! Be alert! [...] Watch!" (vv. 33, 37)?

Group Prayer

There are Christians around the world currently facing persecution, and they ask that we would pray for them.

The Word of God remains our best guide for knowing how to pray for our persecuted sisters and brothers worldwide. So, rooted into His word we pray:

Men: We pray that God would give them the right words and that they would fearlessly make Christ known.

Women: We pray that they will see God's grace as sufficient and God's power perfected in their weakness.

Men: We pray that they will rejoice in sharing the sufferings of Jesus so that they will rejoice even more when Christ is revealed.

Women: We pray that they will endure.

Men: We pray that they will love their enemies.

Women: We pray that they not enter into temptation.

Men: We pray that they will rejoice that they are considered worthy to suffer for HIS name.

Women: We pray that they will live the joy of the Lord before their persecutors.

Men: We pray that they will remember their unbelievable future glory.

Women: We pray that they would learn to more completely trust in God.

Men: We pray that they would rejoice in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's sufferings.

Women: We pray for their physical protection and deliverance.

All: We pray believing that through prayer our world is changed, closed doors are opened, resistant people are made receptive, leaders are put down and raised up, and the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is extended. Amen.¹⁸

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- 1 Russell Moore, "Why Americans Love Doomsday Prophecies," Washington Post, September 22, 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/09/22/why-americans-love-doomsday-prophecies/>.
 - 2 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 390.
 - 3 Strauss, *Mark*, 572; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 390-391; Stein, *Mark*, 598.
 - 4 Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 376.
 - 5 Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 376.
 - 6 Strauss, *Mark*, 578. It is this revolt that is commemorated by the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.
 - 7 Stein, *Mark*, 605.
 - 8 Strauss, *Mark*, 581.
 - 9 Strauss, *Mark*, 581-582.
 - 10 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 401.
 - 11 Stein, *Mark*, 612.
 - 12 Strauss, *Mark*, 590.
 - 13 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 404.
 - 14 Stein, *Mark*, 618; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 405.
 - 15 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 404; Stein, *Mark*, 617; Strauss, *Mark*, 594.
 - 16 Strauss, *Mark*, 594; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 405.
 - 17 Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 379.
 - 18 Prayer from *Voice of the Martyrs*.

NOTES

THE DEAD SEA, ISRAEL



LESSON SEVEN

Mark 14:1-31

Extravagant Sacrifice

The Eucharist – our gathered meal of thanksgiving for the life, death, and resurrection of Christ – transforms each humble meal into a moment to recall that we receive all of life, from soup to salvation, by grace. As such, these small, daily moments are sacramental – not that they are sacraments themselves, but that God meets us in and through the earthy, material world in which we dwell.¹

Tish Harrison Warren

STARTER

In *Bread and Wine: A Love Letter to Life Around the Table*, With Recipes, Shauna Niequist celebrates the sacredness of something very ordinary: food. Arguing that all of life is sacred, Niequist argues that this includes eating and food. Whenever we eat, she writes, we remember the meal, the Last Supper, that God provided for us through Jesus Christ so many years ago, a meal that commemorates Jesus' ultimate sacrifice in order to bring salvation. This meal, and any meal, reminds us that God is present, and God is good. Therefore, whenever we eat, we celebrate God being with us and God being a God who is faithful and good. Food, then, especially food shared, is sacred. She writes:

"I believe the bread and wine is for all of us, for every person, an invitation to believe, a hand extended from divine to human. I believe it's to be torn and handled, gulped . . . I believe that Jesus asked for us to remember him during the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine every time, every meal, every day – no matter where we are, who we are, what we've done.

If we only practice remembrance every time we take Communion at church, we miss three opportunities a day to remember. What a travesty! Eugene Peterson says that 'to eyes that see, every bush is a burning bush.' To those of us who believe that all of life is sacred, every crumb of bread and sip of wine is a Eucharist, a remembrance, a call to awareness of holiness right where we are . . .

Holiness abounds, should we choose to look for it. The whisper and drumbeat of God's Spirit are all around us, should we choose to listen for them. The building blocks of the most common meal – the bread and the wine – are reminders to us: 'He's here! God is here, and he's good.' Every time we eat, every time we gather, every time the table is filled: He's here. He's here, and he is good."²

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 14:1-31 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

Chapter 14 begins a full, 2-chapter long section chronicling the events of the last days and hours of Jesus' life as he goes to his death on the cross. Again in these sections Mark teaches his readers more of who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

Betrayal and Anointing

Mark 14:1-11 is another classic Markan "sandwich" account. Talk of Jesus' betrayal frames the story of a woman who anoints Jesus with perfume. In 14:1-2 the religious leaders plot Jesus' arrest and death, and in 14:10-11 Judas agrees to execute this scheme. By inserting the story of an unnamed woman showing Jesus great devotion in the midst of these accounts of betrayal, Mark points to the woman as a model of discipleship.³

The woman⁴ in this passage enters the place where Jesus and his friends are eating, breaks an expensive bottle of perfume, and empties the bottle on Jesus' head. The disciples scorn this behavior, while Jesus praises the woman. The woman's actions here are significant for several reasons. First, it was not culturally acceptable at that time for a woman to enter a men's gathering. The fact that this woman comes in regardless shows courage and a deep desire and urgency to honor Jesus.⁵

Additionally, the woman's behavior reveals significant honor and devotion to Jesus. The perfume that she pours on Jesus' head is expensive (a detail not lost on the disciples, 14:4-5). Thus, many scholars conclude that this perfume was likely a family heirloom, "in which case it possessed a sentimental value in addition to its monetary value."⁶ This is a costly gift offered wholly to Jesus.

Also by anointing Jesus, the woman is essentially preparing Jesus for death and burial.⁷ Somehow, this anonymous woman recognizes that Jesus will soon suffer and die, and honors him in preparation for these events. No one else, not even Jesus' closest friends, recognize or acknowledge this imminent fate. His followers are still probably expecting Jesus the Messiah to have a glorious victory, not one marked with suffering; their response about the cost of the perfume confirms this confusion. Yet this woman "alone recognizes his impending death and responds with compassion."⁸ She prepares Jesus for the mission for which he came to earth.

The disciples scoff at this woman's countercultural act of extravagant devotion, arguing that instead of "wasting" this perfume on Jesus, the perfume should be sold and the proceeds given to the poor. Jesus rebukes the disciples at length (4 verses! 14:6-9). Once again, by protesting this use of perfume, the disciples show that they still do not understand what is going on with Jesus. They fail to recognize the importance of Jesus right in front of them: "in asserting that there could be a better use for the money, however, they demean Jesus . . . whom they regard as unworthy of such extravagance."⁹

In response to his disciples, Jesus tells them: "'The poor you will always have with you...but you will not always have me'" (14:7). This oft-misinterpreted passage does not justify the existence of poverty or establish Jesus as somehow an advocate for poverty, but is rather a reaction to the disciples' lack of understanding of the significance of Jesus right before them; "Jesus is not dismissive of the poor at all; he merely says the current situation is a unique circumstance."¹⁰

Integral to the mission of the church is caring for those experiencing poverty. The church will always be in the business of ministering to those who are poor. But Jesus Christ will not always be present among people on earth. Jesus wants his disciples to take note; pay attention! Jesus is special and only on earth for a short time, and is worthy of respect, adoration and worship – and the disciples are missing it. But it is exactly this which the anonymous woman recognizes and acts on. And because of her act of devotion in honoring the true Messiah, a Messiah she realizes is facing death, “wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told” (14:9).¹¹

The Last Supper and Predictions of Betrayal

Jesus’ preparations for the Passover meal are reminiscent of his initial entrance into Jerusalem in 11:1-7.¹² Passover, an important Jewish holiday, celebrates God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

Yet in the midst of this intimate celebration, Jesus announces his betrayal. A dear friend with whom Jesus is sharing this special meal, Judas, will soon give Jesus over to be arrested and killed. Jesus is not ignorant of what Judas is about to do. Yet the fact that Jesus knows Judas will betray him does not excuse Judas’ behavior.

Mysteriously, “although [Judas’] behavior will fulfill what has been predicted [14:21], this in no way exonerates his behavior.”¹³ Jesus knows his death is very near, but also knows dying is something he must do. In fact, “Jesus came to [Jerusalem] fully aware that he was to accomplish the Passover in his own person.”¹⁴

Yet this meal Jesus celebrates with his disciples is no typical Passover meal. As they proceed through the different stages and cups of the Passover meal, Jesus strays from reciting the traditional blessings. In a remarkable display of authority, Jesus places himself as the subject of the Passover meal. Jesus once again infuses the Old Testament Scriptures with new meaning. Jesus placing himself as the subject of the Passover meal is a move charged with symbolism. For instance, in this meal, God commanded the Israelites to take a perfect little lamb, adopt the lamb as a pet for two weeks, and then kill and feast on the lamb for the dinner (Exod. 12:1-7). Jesus is the human lamb, a perfect, once-for-all offering.¹⁵

In Jesus redefining the Passover meal with himself as the subject, this meal now has a much larger meaning. Not only does the Passover meal commemorate God's liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression, but it now also celebrates the way Jesus liberates all of humanity from the bondage of sin through his death and resurrection. Complete, comprehensive freedom comes through Jesus Christ.¹⁶

This freedom is established, though, through suffering. During the meal, Jesus equates his body with bread and his blood with wine, broken and spilled out "'for many'" (14:24).¹⁷ Liberation from sin cannot come without Jesus sacrificing his very body, giving up his own self. Suffering does not have the last word, however: Jesus predicts that a new cup will be drunk in the future coming Kingdom of God (14:25).

Jesus gives his life for all sin by all people, including the very people with whom he shares this meal. Who is at this dinner? "The original Last Supper is attended by traitors (v. 18) and cowards (v. 50)." James Edwards writes: "it is a table not of merit but of grace!"¹⁸ And it is for Jesus' sinner friends sharing his Passover table, not only murderers and criminals and rapists, that Jesus goes to the cross; he goes for us all.

After singing a song together,¹⁹ Jesus makes yet another prediction of betrayal. This time, it not just one disciple, but all “‘will . . . fall away,’” he tells them (14:27). In understandable horror, Peter tries to dismiss this prediction, making his own claims of grandiose loyalty. Peter, however, makes this claim at a time of “ease and safety.”²⁰ Nearly immediately after Peter makes this declaration, the disciples do indeed “fall away” in the face of frightening circumstances as the religious leaders seize Jesus.

Group Questions

1. What does the woman in 14:1-9 do? Why are her actions commended by Jesus? How are her actions starkly contrasted by those of the disciples?

2. What does Jesus mean in his response: “The poor you will always have with you” (14:7)?

3. What does Judas decide to do in 14:10-11? What was the response of the religious leaders? What was the response of the disciples when Jesus told them he would be betrayed by them? What does it say about Judas Iscariot that none of the other disciples knew he was the betrayer?

4. What is the Passover feast that Jesus is celebrating with his disciples? What is significant about this Last Supper that Jesus shares with his friends?

5. What does Jesus predict Peter and all the disciples will do? How does Peter respond?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. The woman with the perfume demonstrates abundant and costly adoration to Jesus. What might abundant and costly adoration to Jesus look like in your own life?

2. In this section, Jesus predicts that the disciples, his closest friends and companions, will betray him. All of us have denied and betrayed Jesus in different ways in our lives. How have you both denied Jesus and also received his forgiveness and grace (see John, chapter 21)?

Group Prayer

Let us close in celebrating the Last Supper by praying together prayers of Passover. The following selections are taken from traditional Passover prayers, pieces of Messianic Jewish liturgy, and selections of Psalm 116-118 which were often prayed during Passover.

All, together: Blessed are you O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has given us the way of salvation in Messiah Yeshua.²¹

Leader: Yeshua the Messiah acted as God's Passover lamb for us; he died that we might live . . . Now as we celebrate Passover, we remember not only God's actions during the time of the Exodus but also Yeshua's death for us, which secured our atonement.²²

All, together: What can I give back to the Lord for all His goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call in the name of the Lord. To You Lord, I will offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving and I will call in the name of the Lord.²³

Leader: The All-merciful One . . . brings salvation of his king. He shows covenant-faithfulness to his Anointed, to David and to his seed forever. He makes peace in his heavenly places. May he secure peace to us and for all Israel.²⁴

All, together: Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Amen.²⁵

Additional Resources

For an excellent, easy-to-read, brief chapter on how partaking of Communion is a devotional practice of nourishment, see "Eating Leftovers: Word, Sacrament, and Overlooked Nourishment," 61-73, in *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* by Tish Harrison Warren

Women in the Gospel of Mark²⁶

Women play especially important roles in the Gospel of Mark (1:1-16:8). Not only are they mentioned frequently, but the highest acclaim of Jesus in the Second Gospel goes to women. Mark mentions fifteen different women a total of twenty-two times in the Gospel, not counting the mention of Jesus' sisters (6:3), the "many other women" who followed Jesus from Galilee (15:41), and the mention of the right of women to divorce their husbands (10:12). Of this number, five women are named Mary, Jesus' mother [6:3], Herodias [6:17], Mary Magdalene [15:40, 47; 16:1], Mary mother of James [15:40, 47; 16:1], and Salome [15:40, 16:1]]. To be sure, some women appear in negative roles, such as the mother of Jesus who twice obstructs Jesus (3:31-32; 6:3), and Jesus' sisters once (6:3). The servant girl in the courtyard who questions Peter plays an ambivalent role (14:69ff.), as do Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, who bravely visit the tomb of Jesus but fail to declare his resurrection (16:1, 8). The worst roles fall to Herodias (6:17ff.) and her daughter (6:22ff.) for their responsibility in the death of John the Baptist.

Fifteen of the twenty-two mentions of women, however, appear in unusually positive contexts. The value and dignity of women – and girls – are signified by the fact that Jesus heals them (1:30-31; 5:25-34; 5:23, 41-42; 7:25). In their following and serving of Jesus and the Christian fellowship women are models of discipleship (1:30-31; 15:40, 47; 16:1). In special instances they play prominent roles, even preeminent roles, receiving the highest praise that Jesus gives in the Gospel. On two occasions women appear in the heart of a sandwich technique as the ideal of faith (5:21-43) and devotion (14:1-11). The woman with a hemorrhage is a model of faith for Jairus, the synagogue president (5:25-34); and the Syrophenician woman is a model of faith for all “outsiders” (7:25ff.). The widow in the temple is praised for giving more than everyone else, “her whole life” (12:42). And above all, the anointing at Bethany is so exemplary that the proclamation of the gospel in the world is a commemoration of her act (14:9).

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- 1 Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2016), 71.
 - 2 Shauna Niequist, *Bread and Wine: A Love Letter to Life Around the Table, With Recipes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 252-253, emphasis original.
 - 3 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 232; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 411-412.
 - 4 Because the account of this story in John's Gospel (12:1-8) identifies the woman as Mary, scholars speculate that this woman could have been Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Bock, *Mark*, 335).
 - 5 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 232; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 413.
 - 6 Because it was uncommon at the time for women to be in a position of accumulating wealth (that role was relegated to the man of the household), it was unlikely this woman would have sufficient wealth to purchase this perfume. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 413-414; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 492; Bock, *Mark*, 335.
 - 7 Some also argue that the woman here, in anointing Jesus' body with oil, is essentially functioning as a prophet (1 Sam. 10:1; 16:1-13), "a role not thought to belong to a woman" (Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 232). Scholar Susan Miller writes, "The woman appears to be a prophetic figure, since her action expresses Jesus' identity as Messiah and king" (*Women in Mark's Gospel* [New York: T&T Clark, 2004], 134).
 - 8 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 233; Bock, *Mark*, 335-336; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 494; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 414-416.
 - 9 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 414.
 - 10 Bock, *Mark*, 336.
 - 11 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 233; Bock, *Mark*, 336; Edwards, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 415.
 - 12 It was uncommon for men to carry water jars in first-century Israel (men typically carried water in leather bottles and women carried water in jars), therefore this particular man would have stood out in the crowd. However, the large crowds of people in Jerusalem for Passover would also have made locating this man difficult, pointing further to the way Jesus is in control of all these events (Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 235); Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 421.
 - 13 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 235; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 424.
 - 14 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 501; 502-503; Bock, *Mark*, 341.
 - 15 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 236.
 - 16 Bock, *Mark*, 343; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 506; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 232, 235-236; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 425.
 - 17 The history of Christianity is filled with various interpretations and definitions of the word "is" when Jesus says "this is my body, blood." While this is not an unimportant issue, the vastness of these various interpretations and their history is beyond the scope of this lesson and will not be covered here. Waterstone takes the position that the Communion meal symbolically commemorates Jesus' sacrifice and suffering on behalf of humanity. By participating in Communion, we acknowledge and remember Jesus' sacrifice, surrender to his lordship in our lives, and pray that Jesus himself would nourish us as bread nourishes our bodies. While this is the position on Communion that Waterstone holds, Waterstone also actively practices charitable orthodoxy and welcomes all who profess faith in Jesus Christ to the Communion table, whether or not the partaker shares with Waterstone precisely the same theological view of Communion.
 - 18 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 426; 430.
 - 19 It is significant that this sacred evening is punctuated by music!

20 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 430; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 512; Bock, *Mark*, 344.

21 Yeshua is the Hebrew (Jewish) name for Jesus. Jeremiah Greenberg, *A Messianic Prayer Book for use in Sabbath Services and at Home*, 13th ed. (Tampa, FL: Messianic Liturgical Resources, 2007), 14.

22 John Fischer, *Messianic Services for the Festivals and Holy Days*, 5th ed. (Palm Harbor, FL: Menorah Ministries, 2006), 212.

23 Greenberg, *Messianic Prayer Book*, 94, based on Psalm 116: 12-13, 17-18.

24 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 506, as quoted by N. Glatzer, ed., *The Passover Haggadah* (New York, 1953), 27.

25 Psalm 117.

26 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 417.

NOTES



**GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE,
ISRAEL**

LESSON EIGHT

Mark 14:32-15:15

Jesus: Condemned to Die

On the human level, Judas gave him up to the priests, who gave him up to Pilate, who gave him up to the soldiers, who crucified him. But on the divine level, the Father gave him up, and he gave himself up, to die for us. As we face the cross, then, we can say to ourselves both, 'I did it, my sins sent him there,' and 'He did it, his love took him there.'¹

John Stott

STARTER

The Innocence Project² is a non-profit organization that uses DNA evidence to exonerate prisoners convicted for crimes they did not commit. Since its inception 25 years ago, the Innocence Project has played a large part in releasing over 350 individuals who were wrongfully convicted. Many of these innocent individuals served many years before their eventual release. The Washington Post reports that, “the average time served for...exonerated individuals in the [National Registry of Exonerations] is more than nine years.”³

The stories of these individuals are heartbreaking. Many maintain innocence throughout their trial, but are convicted anyway, spending years in prison for crimes of which they are completely innocent. Combinations of poor police work, flawed judicial systems, and other factors are often the cause for these wrongful convictions. Yet even when these individuals are proven innocent and are released from prison, they still have to face the reality of a world that has gone on without them: children growing up, relationships changing, birthdays, weddings and funerals missed. Though their innocence has prevailed, they cannot reclaim the years spent in prison.

These stories are particularly tragic. They speak to a deep place of injustice when individuals are punished severely for something of which they are completely innocent.

However, even these stories of injustice pale in comparison to the story Mark tells in his Gospel – that of Jesus, a perfect and sinless man, wrongfully convicted of a crime and enduring an excruciating death. In fact, even a man convicted of murder – Barabbas – was released to go free in Jesus’ place while Jesus was arrested, tried, beaten, and killed.

Yet in the midst of this seemingly grave injustice, God is at work to bring ultimate restoration.

1. Have you ever been accused of something you did not do? What was that like? How did you respond to the accusations?

2. What is an issue of injustice you are passionate about?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 14:32 – 15:15 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

The Garden of Gethsemane

After the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples go to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus asks Peter, James and John to accompany him in the garden, requesting them to keep watch and pray while Jesus goes off and prays himself.

Jesus retreats and prays to his Father on the brink of his arrest. In great anguish, Jesus pleads with God that he be spared the coming circumstances. Not only does Jesus know that death awaits him, but he is also anticipating encountering the judgment of God: "The worst prospect of becoming the sin-bearer for humanity is that it spells complete alienation from God."⁴

This prayer is significant in that it reveals a very close relationship between Jesus and the Father. "Abba" is a term for Father which connotes deep intimacy and familiarity. Jesus, in using this name here, conveys "obedient surrender and unconditional faith in the Father."⁵ The close relationship between the Father and Son seen here heightens Jesus' anguish as he anticipates a separation from his Father on the cross as he bears all of humanity's sin.

Also, even though Jesus understandably feels sorrow and anguish about encountering God's judgment and wrath, ultimately he submits to the will of the Father: "his prayer is God-centered, not self-centered."⁶ Despite knowing the coming agony of the task he must fulfill, Jesus does not abandon the will of God but actively carries it out.

Three times Jesus leaves Peter, James and John to pray, and three times he returns to find them sleeping. Though Peter just pledged himself to Jesus just verses earlier (14:29; 31), the disciples fall away. The thrice repeated failure also hints at Peter's three more explicit betrayals to come.⁷

Jesus' Arrest

While Jesus and his disciples are still in the garden, an armed mob approaches Jesus. As all the religious leaders are involved in this arrest (14:43), it is most likely that the authorization given for Jesus' arrest came directly from the Sanhedrin, the leading Jewish authorities. Likely anticipating a violent resistance of arrest by Jesus and the disciples, they come sneakily at night, weapons in hand.⁸

Judas, "one of the Twelve," is with the mob (14:43). Mark clearly identifies Judas here as one of Jesus' closest friends, making his betrayal all the more "shocking and painful."⁹ Judas kisses Jesus and calls him Rabbi, intimate acts that deliver Jesus to the mob.

Immediately, Jesus is alone (14:50-51). Upon his arrest, his dear companions desert him. Even an anonymous young man in the garden flees the scene. There are various theories as to the identity of this man, the most prominent being that this man is Mark, the gospel author himself. However, regardless of this man's identity, by the end of this section, Jesus is alone, deserted even by anonymous bystanders.¹⁰

Before the Sanhedrin

The religious leaders waste no time, immediately bringing Jesus before the Sanhedrin. Scholars surmise that the religious leaders were not necessarily following proper legal protocol here as outlined by Jewish law in conducting Jesus' trial. Corners are cut and the process of Jesus' trial is expedited with unprecedented speed. The Sanhedrin, while holding a fair bit of ruling authority, does not have the authority to issue a death sentence. Only the Roman government can do that. So in order to have Jesus killed, which has been the plot of the religious leaders all along, they need to have Pilate, the Roman authority, issue a death sentence. Because cases for Pilate have to be put on the docket by early in the morning in order for them to be tried, the religious leaders need to rush Jesus' trial along so he could be brought before Pilate and executed the next day.¹¹

So Jesus appears before the Sanhedrin and the high priest, Caiaphas.¹² Several witnesses offer testimonies of what they claim Jesus said, but their stories do not agree. Without corroborated testimonies, the trial cannot proceed. Finally Caiaphas himself questions Jesus. Ironically, it is from the mouth of Jesus' accuser that comes a full articulation of Jesus' identity. "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Caiaphas asks (14:61).

Jesus' response not only confirms Caiaphas' question, but also shows Jesus claiming "to share authority with God."¹³ The messianic implications of Jesus' response are not lost on Caiaphas. He clearly understands that Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah: "the Sanhedrin would understand Jesus' words as an unqualified claim to messianic dignity."¹⁴

It is with this response that the charge is confirmed: in the eyes of the highest religious leaders of the day, Jesus is guilty of blasphemy, of claiming to be God. In response to this scandalous claim, Caiaphas tears his robes, and, in conjunction with the others present, condemn him "as worthy of death" (14:64).¹⁵

Peter Disowns Jesus

Peter follows behind Jesus and waits in the courtyard of the high priest during Jesus' trial. While warming himself by the fire, a servant girl and others standing nearby three times ask Peter if he is one of Jesus' disciples. Three times Peter denies these claims, each denial increasing in the intensity to which he refuses any association with Jesus. He so distances himself from Jesus that he can't even say Jesus' name; he is ashamed of being associated with him. While Jesus remains faithful when faced with pressure and interrogation, the pressure of his own trials only cause Peter, one of Jesus' most faithful disciples, to fall away.¹⁶

Trial before Pilate

In expediting Jesus' trial before Jewish authorities, Jesus is ready to be presented before Pilate the very next morning. Right away, Pilate asks Jesus if he is the king of the Jews, a claim Jesus confirms. Yet "the designation of 'king of the Jews' is a secularized form of 'Messiah' which permitted Jesus' messianic claim to be transposed into a political key inviting the decisive intervention of Pilate."¹⁷ Pilate recognizes the political implications of what Jesus is claiming, namely the possibility that Jesus is a direct threat to the Roman government, and proceeds with the trial.

Though Pilate is reluctant to give the Jewish authorities what they want (15:12-14), he also falls sway to the religious leaders and the crowd they are provoking (15:11). Probably not expecting the crowd to behave the way it does, Pilate poses a question he is then stuck answering: "'What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?'" (15:12). "'Crucify him!'", the crowd roars back in a unanimous voice of rage.

Pilate gives the crowd a choice of which prisoner to release: Barabbas, a convicted insurrectionist and murderer, or Jesus. Yet even this does not appease the crowd riled by religious leaders. Instead of asking for Jesus, the crowd demands Barabbas' release. Jesus is condemned to death.

Crucifixion, the method of death Jesus is condemned to, “was seen as the cruelest form of execution.”¹⁸ This terrible fate however is preceded by something nearly as gruesome: flogging. Roman flogging involved whipping a prisoner with a leather strap embedded with sharp objects, such as rock or metal, intended to gouge and tear flesh. There was no maximum number of whips prescribed by the Romans, and sometimes flogging would kill a prisoner before they even reached crucifixion.

It is a group effort that leads to Jesus’ crucifixion. The Jewish authorities, the Roman government, the fickle crowd, and even one of Jesus’ closest followers all play a role in bringing about his crucifixion. Yet despite the terrible heartache of experiencing betrayal and false accusations and severe physical pain, Jesus does not lose sight of the mission of the cross.¹⁹ Jesus succumbs to the sin of humanity in order to bring about their salvation.

Group Questions

1. Describe the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. What and how many times does Jesus pray? Why is Jesus “deeply distressed and troubled”? What do we learn about Jesus’ values through his prayer?

2. The testimonies of witnesses against Jesus ultimately do not agree (14:56-59), and thus cannot be used to accuse Jesus. Whose testimony is it that finally confirms accusation? What is it about this testimony that makes the high priest so infuriated (14:63)? Ultimately, why is Jesus sent to trial and killed? (14:63-64)

3. What does Jesus say is his identity (14:62)? Why does he respond this way when he has been so careful about protecting his identity through Mark?

4. Compare and contrast Jesus and Peter, who are both essentially on trial in this section (Jesus before the Sanhedrin and Peter in the courtyard).

5. Why does Pilate agree to have Jesus killed (15:15)? Who is it that is released instead of Jesus, and what do we know about this man? What role did the religious leaders have in securing this result?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. How does Jesus' prayer from the Garden of Gethsemane echo prayers of lament, such as we see in the Psalms? When have you prayed prayers of lament? How has entering into prayers of lament in your own life or alongside others experiencing hardships impacted your faith?

2. Jesus experienced betrayal by close friends, false accusations and physical pain in order to bring salvation to us, his people. How does knowing that Jesus lived among us on earth and experienced many of the same things we do shape the way you see Jesus and interact with him? Do you believe that Jesus is with you in any and all circumstances? How does that change the way you pray and/or live?

Group Prayer

In response to our sin which sent Jesus to the cross, let us confess our sins and praise Jesus for what he has done on the cross.

Prayers from John Wesley

Group: Silently or aloud, confess your sins to God.

Leader: Forgive them all, O Lord: our sins of omission and our sins of commission; the sins of our youth and the sins of our riper years; the sins of our souls and the sins of our bodies; our secret and our more open sins; our sins of ignorance and surprise, and our more deliberate and presumptuous sins; the sins we have done to please others; the sins we know and remember, and the sins we have forgotten; the sins we have striven to hide from others and the sins by which we have made others offend; forgive them, O Lord, forgive them all for his sake, who died for our sins and rose for our justification, and now stands at thy right hand to make intercession for us, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Group: Jesus, poor, unknown and despised, have mercy on us, and let us not be ashamed to follow you. Jesus, accused, and wrongfully condemned, teach us to bear insults patiently, and let us not seek our own glory. Jesus, crowned with thorns and hailed in derision; buffeted, overwhelmed with injuries, griefs and humiliations; Jesus, hanging on the accursed tree, bowing the head, giving up [his spirit], have mercy on us, and conform our whole lives to your spirit. Amen.²⁰

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- 1 John Stott, *The Cross of Christ: 20th Anniversary Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 64.
 - 2 www.innocenceproject.org.
 - 3 Samuel R. Gross, "The Staggering Number of Wrongful Convictions in America," *The Washington Post*, July 24, 2015, accessed October 30, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-cost-of-convicting-the-innocent/2015/07/24/260fc3a2-1aae-11e5-93b7-5eddc056ad8a_story.html?utm_term=.566b04384ae6.
 - 4 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 433.
 - 5 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 518; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 434; Bock, *Mark*, 346.
 - 6 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 241; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 518.
 - 7 Bock, *Mark*, 47; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 518.
 - 8 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 240; Bock, *Mark*, 348-349; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 525.
 - 9 Bock, *Mark*, 348.
 - 10 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 526-527; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 440; Bock, *Mark*, 350.
 - 11 Bock, *Mark*, 352; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 443; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 547-549.
 - 12 Mark does not name the high priest here, but in other gospels he is identified as Caiaphas (*Matthew* 26:57, *John* 18:24).
 - 13 Bock, *Mark*, 356; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 535; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 446.
 - 14 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 537.
 - 15 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 538-539.
 - 16 Bock, *Mark*, 357, 358; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 451; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 543.
 - 17 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 550; 549; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 244.
 - 18 Bock, *Mark*, 364; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 557; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 464.
 - 19 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 464; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 245.
 - 20 Michael Counsell, ed., *2000 Years of Prayer* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 314.

NOTES



**SKULL ROCK, NEAR GARDEN TOMB,
ISRAEL**

LESSON NINE

Mark 15:16-47

The Son of God's Humiliation

In the movie *The Last Emperor*, the young child anointed as the last emperor of China lives a magical life of luxury with a thousand eunuch servants at his command. 'What happens when you do wrong?' his brother asks. 'When I do wrong, someone else is punished,' the boy emperor replies. To demonstrate, he breaks a jar, and one of the servants is beaten. In Christian theology, Jesus reversed that ancient pattern: when the servants erred, the King was punished. Grace is free only because the giver himself has born the cost.¹

Philip Yancey

STARTER

Tim Keller, in his book *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, argues that Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion serve as a resource for our hearts in the midst of a world filled with suffering and evil. He writes:

Christian minister John Dickson once spoke on the theme of the wounds of God on a university campus in Sydney, Australia. During the question time, a Muslim man rose to explain 'how preposterous was the claim that the Creator of the universe should be subjected to the forces of his own creation—that he would have to eat, sleep, and go to the toilet, let alone die on a cross.' Dickson said his remarks were intelligent, cogent, and civil. The man went on to argue that it was illogical that God, the 'cause of all causes' could have pain inflicted on him by any lesser beings. The minister felt he had no knockdown argument, no witty comeback. So finally he simply thanked the man for making the uniqueness of the Christian claim so clear. 'What the Muslim denounces as blasphemy the Christian holds precious: God has wounds.'

[...] Only Christianity, of all the world's major religions, teaches that God came to earth in Jesus Christ and became subject to suffering and death himself.

See what this means? Yes, we do not know the reason God allows evil and suffering to continue, or why it is so random, but now at least we know what the reason is not. It cannot be that he does not love us. It cannot be that he does not care. He is so committed to our ultimate happiness that he was willing to plunge into the greatest depths of suffering himself.

He understands us, he has been there, and he assures us that he has a plan to eventually wipe away every tear. Someone might say, "But that's only half an answer to the question 'Why?'" Yes, but it is the half we need.²

1. Many people object to the idea of a good God because of all of the evil and suffering in the world. Have you ever struggled with this?

2. How does the fact that "God has wounds," change the conversation about a good God allowing suffering and evil in the world?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 15:16-47 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

By this point in Mark, most of Jesus' third passion prediction (10:33-34) has already been fulfilled. Jesus has been delivered over to the chief priests and teachers of the law by one of his disciples, they condemned him to death, and handed him over to the Gentile governor Pontius Pilate who has him flogged and handed over to be crucified. In this week's passage (15:16-47), Jesus will be mocked, spit on and killed in fulfillment of Jesus' passion prediction.

Soldiers Mock Jesus

Jesus, already having been flogged, is led away from Pilate by a company of Roman soldiers who throw Jesus a mock coronation as "the king of the Jews." Not only does this scene continue to fulfill Jesus third passion prediction but it also alludes to Isaiah's Suffering Servant (Isa. 50:6-7), an Old Testament prophecy which predicts the suffering of the Messiah. They clothe Jesus in a purple robe, which signifies royalty because it was the most expensive dye in the ancient world. They impress on Jesus' head a crown made of thorns, instead of a laurel wreath which "was used to celebrate conquering heroes, victorious athletes, and honored citizens."³ They mockingly salute Jesus, crying out "Hail, king of the Jews!" (15:18) which parodies the salute to Caesar, "Hail, Caesar, Emperor!"⁴

In a burlesque show, the soldiers scorn Jesus by falling prostrate before him as they beat and spit on him. There is a tragic irony to this whole affair; the soldiers, “despite their intention, acknowledge in both word (v. 18) and deed (v. 19) Jesus’ true identity. Even in rebellion against God, humanity still bears witness to God!”⁵

The Crucifixion of Jesus

As the soldiers lead Jesus out to be crucified, they conscript a man named Simon to carry Jesus’ horizontal crosspiece to Golgotha, the place where Jesus was to be crucified. Normally, those who were crucified were required to carry their own crossbeam to the crucifixion site, but Jesus’ weakened state due to the flogging likely prompted the soldiers’ demand of Simon.⁶ Mark mentions Simon’s sons Alexander and Rufus by name, leading scholars to believe that Mark’s original audience would have known them and could ask them about the events of that day.⁷

The soldiers brought Jesus to a place called Golgotha, which Mark translates as “the place of the skull,” (16:22). Executions of criminals took place outside of city walls, usually near a major intersection in order to make it a public spectacle and warning to others contemplating breaking Roman law.⁸ While the exact location of Golgotha is unknown, most scholars believe it is where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre sits.⁹

Once they arrive at Golgotha, the soldiers offer Jesus wine mixed with myrrh. Perhaps this was a merciful gesture, as it was believed in those days that myrrh had narcotic properties. Others see this as the soldiers further mocking Jesus by “providing the ‘king’ with the finest of wines.”¹⁰ Either way, Jesus turns down the offer.

Mark, without adornment, states, "And then they crucified him," (15:24). Crucifixion had been practiced for centuries by the Persians and Greeks, but it became the Romans' favorite form of capital punishment for those who challenged Rome's authority. It was such a horrific punishment that it was not legal to carry out on Roman citizens: "Cicero calls it 'the cruelest and most hideous punishment possible.' [First century historian] Josephus refers to it as 'the most miserable of deaths.'"¹¹ Those who were crucified were either nailed or tied to a cross in the shape of a "T" or "t." They could survive for days hanging up on the cross; death did not usually come from blood loss but from exhaustion and asphyxiation.¹² Crucifixion was an incredibly shameful way to die, especially for the Messiah. The apostle Paul wrote a couple of decades later "but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles," (1 Cor. 1:23).

The soldiers divide up Jesus' clothes (15:24) in a practice similar to dividing plunder after a battle, but the language that Mark uses echoes Psalm 22:18. The charge against Jesus, "The King of the Jews," is written to identify to all his crime but also to mock Jesus, even though ironically the statement is true.¹³ Jesus is also crucified between two outlaws, likely insurrectionists, in fulfillment of Isaiah's Suffering Servant passage which says "he was numbered with the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12).¹⁴

The fickle crowds, the religious leaders, and even those who were crucified next to Jesus all mock Jesus. Their actions seem to fulfill Psalm 22:6-8. It is ironic that the crowds bring up the charge against Jesus that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, because "by staying on the cross, Jesus is bringing an end to the sacrificial system and so 'destroying' the purpose and function of the temple."¹⁵ Both the crowds and the religious elite both taunt Jesus that if he really was the Messiah that he would save himself; "Jesus, however, has not taken upon himself the mission of self-help and self-fulfillment. He will be a 'ransom for *others*' (10:45)."¹⁶

The Death of Jesus

There are four vital theological events that surround Jesus' death. The first is that "at noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon" (15:33). Darkness in the Old Testament is often associated with the judgment of God (Amos 8:9; Isa. 13:9-13; Ex. 10:21-23; Joel 2:20; 3:14-15). This darkness likely symbolizes God's coming judgment against Israel and her leaders in 70 AD (Mark 13:1-23).¹⁷

Secondly, Jesus has remained relatively silent throughout his two trials, being mocked and beaten, and being crucified, but after being on the cross for six hours, Jesus finally cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34). The crowds think that Jesus has cried out for the prophet Elijah which in Hebrew sounds similar to Jesus' cry "Eloi, Eloi." Many thought that Elijah would come in times of crisis to rescue the righteous.¹⁸

Jesus is not crying out for someone to come save him but is quoting Psalm 22:1. "...While it is important to keep all of Psalm 22 in mind, Jesus is only recorded as crying out the words of despair from the beginning of the Psalm and not the words of assurance and joy at the end of it, "this suggests that he is indeed experiencing what the psalmist expresses, the agony of suffering and the pain of forsakenness."¹⁹ The most likely reason for Jesus' cry of dereliction is that "Jesus is wholly forsaken and exposed to the horror of humanity's sin. Its horror is so total that in his dying breath he senses his separation from God."²⁰

The third is that after Jesus cries out and took his last breath, "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom," (15:38). The author of Hebrews, in Hebrews 10:19-20, understands that the tearing of the curtain confirms that temple sacrifices are no longer necessary as Jesus' death has opened a new way, open to all, into God's presence.²¹ The tearing of the curtain is "a revelation of Jesus' identity and the significance of his death."²²

The fourth vital theological event is the centurion in response to his seeing Jesus die, declares "Surely this man was the son of God!" (15:39). This proclamation is groundbreaking because it is a Gentile soldier who makes the boldest confession by a human of Christ's identity in Mark's Gospel. He "recognizes that Jesus' divine sonship and messianic identity are confirmed **not through conquest, but through suffering.**"²³ The title "The Son of God" is the strongest title for Jesus in Mark's Gospel, and the centurion's confession along with Mark 1:1 are seen as bookends to the Gospel of Mark.²⁴ We see the good news of Jesus is not only for Israel but for all who place their faith in him.

Mark in 15:40-41 mentions women who were followers of Jesus watching his crucifixion from a distance. He mentions three women in particular: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and Salome. None of Jesus' male disciples are present; it is only these faithful women, disciples who have been supporting Jesus' ministry all along who are still present with him when he is crucified.

The Burial of Jesus

According to Jewish law, executed individuals must be buried before nightfall (Deut. 21:23) and especially the day before the Sabbath when no work was to be done.²⁵ So Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, goes "boldly" to Pilate to ask if he can bury Jesus. This shows that the Jewish leadership was not uniformly against Jesus, that there were exceptions to their hatred towards Jesus. Joseph's request was bold as he is asking to bury a man that both his Jewish compatriots and the Roman authorities had condemned to death.

Pilate is surprised by Joseph's request because it usually took days for victims of crucifixion to die, so Pilate summons the centurion to confirm that Jesus is already dead. Many through the years have suggested theories that Jesus did not actually die on the cross, but the Romans and especially Roman soldiers were experts at killing people. Of the thousands of people that the Roman authorities crucified through the centuries "not one of [them] is recorded as surviving the cross."²⁶

So Pilate releases the body to Joseph, who quickly buries Jesus with a traditional Jewish burial of wrapping the body in linen and placing it in a tomb. Once again, it is not Jesus' male disciples who are witnesses to the burial, but it is by his women disciples, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph.

Group Questions

1. Rather than Jesus' physical suffering, what does Mark seem to emphasize in 15:16-32? How is this treatment ironic?

2. Mark does not often mention people's names, so why does Mark use Simon of Cyrene's name and his two sons' names?

3. How does Jesus' treatment fulfill Jesus' third passion prediction in Mark 10:33-34? Psalm 22? And Isaiah's Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah 50:6-7 and Isaiah 53:4-12?

4. Why doesn't Jesus come down from the cross and save himself? Why did Jesus have to die?

5. In regards to four significant theological points about the crucifixion, (a) What is the significance of the darkness that comes over the land (15:33)? (b) Of Jesus crying out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34)? (c) Of the temple curtain being torn in two? (d) And of the centurion's confessions "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (15:39)?

6. Who are the only disciples still following Jesus at his crucifixion and burial?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. The theme of Jesus fulfilling Old Testament prophecies (Psalm 22; Isaiah 50:6-7; 53:4-12) and also his own passion predictions (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) is strong in this passage. How does the fact that Jesus' crucifixion is a fulfillment of prophecies affect how you view it?

2. What does it mean to you that the temple curtain has been torn, and we are able to approach God with confidence (Heb. 4:16)?

3. How great of a value does God place on humans that he is willing to pay such a high price in order to be in a relationship with us? How does that change your understanding of God?

Group Prayer

In light of Jesus' crucifixion, take a few minutes and meditate silently on 2 Corinthians 5:21 in which Paul writes "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Then spend the next few minutes praying aloud by praising and thanking Jesus for what he accomplished for us on the cross.

Then spend a few minutes praying for neighbors, family, friends, and co-workers who are not followers of Jesus, that they might know and follow Jesus.

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- 1 Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 67.
 - 2 Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 120-121.
 - 3 Strauss, Mark, 687.
 - 4 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 466-467; Strauss, Mark, 687.
 - 5 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 465.
 - 6 Stein, Mark, 709; Strauss, Mark, 688.
 - 7 Strauss, Mark, 689; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 470. Paul mentions a Rufus in Romans 16:13, which may be the Rufus referred to here, which would further point to Mark writing to an audience in Rome.
 - 8 Strauss, Mark, 689; Stein, Mark, 710.
 - 9 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 471; Strauss, Mark, 689; Stein, Mark, 720; Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 394.
 - 10 Strauss, Mark, 690.
 - 11 Strauss, Mark, 690.
 - 12 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 469; Strauss, Mark, 691.
 - 13 Stein, Mark, 713.
 - 14 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 472.
 - 15 Strauss, Mark, 694.
 - 16 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 474.
 - 17 Stein, Mark, 715.
 - 18 Strauss, Mark, 703.
 - 19 Strauss, Mark, 702.
 - 20 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 476.
 - 21 Confirming this is the Greek word for "torn" in this verse is also the verb used in Mark 1:10 where heaven is "torn" open and a voice declares Jesus to be God's son.
 - 22 Strauss, Mark, 705.
 - 23 Strauss, Mark, 706.
 - 24 Strauss, Mark, 706.
 - 25 Strauss, Mark, 708.
 - 26 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 489.

NOTES



MOUNT TABOR, ISRAEL

LESSON TEN

Mark 16:1-8

He is Risen!

When Jesus emerged from the tomb, justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty rose with him. Something has happened in and through Jesus as a result of which the world is a different place, a place where heaven and earth have been joined forever. God's future has arrived in the present. Instead of mere echoes, we hear the voice itself: a voice which speaks of rescue from evil and death, and hence of a new creation.¹

N.T. Wright

And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless.
1 Corinthians 15:14 (NLT)

STARTER

In this narrative, Walter Wangerin, Jr. writes the story of the resurrection from Mark's Gospel from the perspective of Mary, one of the women who found Jesus' tomb empty. Here, Mary describes to Peter what she and the other women experienced that Easter morning. This retelling helps us imagine what encountering the empty tomb would have been like, and perhaps provides some insight into the women's responses to the resurrection in Mark 16:8.

—
Peter, hold me. Just hold me. I can't stop shaking. Feel it? Hold me tight. I stood in the place where Moses stood, and the world is spinning so fast –

Listen: oils and spices, ointment jars. That's it. Our hands were full, but that's all we carried. Honestly, nothing for ourselves, all for the body of Jesus. Mary and Salome and me. We went outside the city wall. The sun was just rising. Dew on the grass was white, so that we made three trails behind us. And we cast long shadows. There was a sparrow. We wanted to honor Jesus. We were going to touch him. I thought about the smell.

Old Mary was crying.

Suddenly she stopped and said that we were fools, that we couldn't anoint him.

She made us angry.

"Who's going to stop us?" I shouted. "Who cares for a criminal's corpse?"

"No," the old woman said, "that's not it. You saw it, too."

"Saw what?"

"The stone. Who will roll away the stone from the door?"

"Mary! I will, all right?" I was so mad I really felt I could do it alone...I swept ahead with long strides, raging. Oh, I had such hate for the world and all things and God –

But the stone was rolled back.

No, Peter, listen! This is a very big stone, a very heavy stone, not even you could move it uphill, don't you see? But the door of the tomb was open! All my feelings went straight to fear. Something was wrong. I wasn't mad, I was panicking.

I dropped my ointments. I crept forward and went down on my knees and looked inside –

Do you remember what you told me about Moses and Elijah and Jesus on the mountain, and you saw all three of them, and a cloud came, and Jesus grew so bright it blinded you, and the voice of God came down and roared, remember? Peter, I believe you now...I love you so much for telling me that story. Oh Peter, I know how you felt! I know exactly. It was terror, right? But more than that: fear and love together.

Listen! There was a young man in the tomb, dressed in white like Jesus on the mountain. But not Jesus! Jesus was not there!

This young man knew me. He knew what I was doing there. I never saw him before. He said, "You're looking for Jesus. He has risen."

Peter, are you listening? Do you understand? He said risen! I didn't scream.

The man pointed at a stone ledge inside the tomb and said, "He is not here. See the place where they laid him."

I did not scream then – but I stared at the bare ledge and started to shake, and I'll tell you why. Terror. Fear and wonder and love all mixed in me, and my body couldn't take it. Oh, Peter, I still can't take it, but I believe it. I believe it. I stood in the spot where Jesus came back to life. That's so holy! That's so frightening. He isn't the man I thought he was. He is the glory of God! I stood as close to

God as Moses did, closer – and I'll tell you why I didn't scream.

Because I couldn't even breathe. I stared at the stone and I thought how he loved me, how he loves me, loves me, Peter, plain Mary...

and it was enough that he loved me so long as he lived, but then he died and it was nothing. But now think, Peter! Think how terribly mighty that love must be to rise from the dead! Peter, do you understand what I'm saying to you? This is the love of Almighty God the Father, now, right here! Right here! That's why I'm shaking.

Hold me. Hold me. I promise, I'm telling the truth. Hold me tight.
Stop my shaking. Peter, believe me –

Well, well, and if you can't believe me, come with me.

The young man in white told me to tell you what to do now, Simon.
Hold me just a little longer, dear, good, and stony Simon. It's a
killing terror, isn't it? Exquisite and sharp – a painful, impossible
joy. Yes – but I am growing calmer now. Thank you...And now
what?

Why, now we will go and see the Lord alive. And then you will
believe me.

For Jesus is going before us to Galilee; there you will see him,
exactly as he promised.²

1. Describe a situation where you were afraid, but chose to do the
right thing anyway in the midst of your fear.

2. What is one (or more) thing(s) you will take away from this study
of Mark?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 16:1 – 8 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

In a mere eight verses in the final chapter of his Gospel, Mark shares that Jesus is no longer dead in his tomb, but risen! In the event of the resurrection, Jesus, Son of God, confirms his predictions of resurrection, vanquishes death and secures salvation for all. God is truly a God who keeps his promises and works miraculously on behalf of all people.³ Alleluia!

The Two Endings of Mark

In between verses 8 and 9 there is an indication that verses 9-20 were not included in the original manuscripts of Mark. Scholars are essentially unanimous that the longer ending of Mark (16:9-20), is not an ending penned by Mark. The oldest manuscripts of Mark do not contain this section, nor do the early church fathers acknowledge this longer ending. Additionally, the writing style of this section is noticeably distinct from the rest of the book, particularly with the inclusion of new vocabulary not seen elsewhere in the book.⁴

Scholars theorize on why this longer ending was incorporated. As discussed below, verse 8 ends abruptly. Perhaps the early church wanted to develop this sudden ending, softening the abrupt and rather “dissatisfying” ending and provide an account of the risen Christ himself.⁵

Despite the fact that Mark likely did not write this ending, 16:9-20 does still date back to the early second century. Tradition has contributed to this portion remaining within the Scriptural text itself.⁶ However, because Mark probably did not write this section and most commentators do not even address these verses, this commentary will focus exclusively on 16:1-8.

The Women at the Tomb

When the Sabbath was over, on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (the same women Mark identifies in 15:40 as standing vigil at the cross), go to Jesus’ tomb to anoint his body. Anointing did not involve embalming or efforts to preserve the body, but involved placing spices on the body, strictly an “act of devotion” for the deceased person.⁷ Though likely still in shock over the brutal death of their Messiah, the women go out of their way to honor Jesus.

Upon arriving at the tomb, the women’s fears about who will roll the large boulder away from the entrance to the tomb are allayed as they encounter the tomb open! Inside the tomb sits a young man dressed in white. The women are naturally startled. While the text does not specifically say this man was an angel, his white attire and command to the women to not be afraid fits within the paradigm of angelic messengers throughout Scripture. The young man is most likely an angel.⁸

The young man then tells the women the good news: “He has risen!” (16:6). The body the women came to anoint is not in the tomb; the place where Jesus was laid is empty. The very same Jesus of Nazareth whom the women saw die on the cross only days earlier is no longer dead, but alive!⁹

The young man also tells the women to “tell the disciples and Peter” of this event and that they will soon see Jesus alive in Galilee (16:7). The specific mention here of Peter is significant. Peter’s denial of Jesus just days before (14:66-72) leads to him being intentionally included here, which declares Peter reinstated, forgiven from this act of treachery.¹⁰

By commanding them to tell of this good news, the young man commissions these three women as the first preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Mary, Mary, and Salome are to proclaim the good news of Jesus’ resurrection to the disciples; they “are called to be the first witnesses to Christ’s resurrected glory.”¹¹

And this witness is one in which we can trust. One significant point of evidence for the veracity of this witness comes from the fact that they were women. In first-century Israel, a society which distrusted the credibility of a woman’s witness, women being the first testimony of the resurrection is monumental. Darrell Bock writes that, “selling a difficult idea (resurrection) through the testimony of people (women) who do not count culturally as witnesses was not a plan designed in some budding church leaders’ conference room to turn around a discouraged community.”¹²

The movement Jesus had started was in shambles after his death: his followers’ worst fears had been confirmed, their worlds turned upside down. If Jesus’ followers, in the wake of Jesus’ death, strategized to figure out how to “save face” by somehow manufacturing the resurrection or spreading lies about Jesus’ resurrection, they would not have chosen women for this role in the resurrection story. Yet all four gospels record women witnessing the empty tomb.

The likelihood that the women’s role in this event was invented by the early church and gospel writers is extremely slim; women as witnesses and proclaimers of the resurrection must be factual. While perhaps unusual for God to choose people distrusted in society to tell a world-shattering truth, “the testimony of women is, however, entirely ‘in character’ with the divine economy: those whose testimony is discounted in human society are the first to be included in the divine society (1 Cor 1:26-28)!”¹³

Mark ends abruptly in 16:8: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." Not only does this seem to be a curious and sudden ending to such a carefully crafted narrative, but it is strange that Mark ends with fear, when a major theme throughout Mark has been a call from fear to faith.¹⁴ Even these women disciples, who have been so faithful to Jesus, even when he hung on the cross, flee in fear and seem to desert their Savior.¹⁵

However, several considerations can help make sense of this passage. Considering that in the presence of the empty tomb the women are standing face-to-face with the presence of God, fear and bewilderment would have been a natural response. God's power is on full display with the young man and the empty tomb (see the Starter for a helpful narrative of what this might have been like for the women); they see "'the Kingdom of God come with power'" (9:1), as Jesus predicted.¹⁶

Anytime a person encounters the presence of God throughout Scripture, this experience is always overwhelming; confronting God's power, holiness and goodness in full display "is soul-shaking," commentator William Lane writes. ...confronting God's power, holiness and goodness in full display "is soul-shaking," commentator William Lane writes, "and to convey this impression Mark describes in the most meaningful language the utter amazement and overwhelming feeling of the women."¹⁷

And, scholars note that while 16:8 ends with the women fearfully concealing the event they witnessed, because the message about Jesus' resurrection did not stay hidden, "they eventually had to have overcome their fear." The story does not end, then, with fear but with faith. While the text does not record this specifically here, the fact that in reality the account of the resurrection did not stay concealed reveals that the women acted in their faith in the risen Christ over their experience of fear. In and despite their fear, these women lean into their faith and boldly proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Similarly for us as 21st century readers of Scripture, we are left with a similar conundrum: through the Gospel of Mark we have encountered Jesus Christ and his resurrection. What will be our response? Commentator Darrell Bock poses the question:

It is here [16:8] our current copies of Mark end, leaving readers a choice. Do they fear or move on to faith, as the women clearly did by telling their story? If the Gospel ended here, then Mark leaves the end of the story open with a note of the wonder of the event. It fits other scenes where fear leads people either to walk away from God or to take a step of faith (Mark 4:40-41; 5:15-20, 34-36). The question becomes what you, the reader, will do with the empty tomb and what it shows about Jesus.¹⁹

Mark has shown that the commitment to follow Jesus is not an easy task. It involves sacrifice, prioritizing Jesus above other earthly things and relationships, choosing to trust Jesus in the midst of frightening circumstances, and perhaps even experiencing suffering and death on his behalf.

However, all throughout this gospel, Mark also shows that being a disciple of Jesus is worth these risks. Jesus is truly the Son of God, the all-powerful, compassionate Messiah who is willing to endure things of this earthly life – even betrayal, flogging, and a gruesome death – in order to restore our relationship with God and bring us the fullness of life. It is this God who is worthy of all praise and adoration and commitment. As we put our trust in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, may we gladly surrender our lives to him and co-labor with him for the coming of his abundant Kingdom.

Group Questions

1. Why did Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome go to Jesus' tomb? What did they encounter when they arrived at Jesus' tomb? What was their response to the young man?

2. Why is it significant that Jesus' female disciples were the first witnesses of his resurrection?

3. What did the young man tell the women to do? Why is Peter singled out (16:7)?

4. How is Jesus fully vindicated in this passage? How does Jesus fulfill his passion predictions by rising from the dead? What does that tell us about the nature of God's faithfulness?

5. Why did Jesus need to rise from the dead?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. What is your response to Jesus rising from the dead? Do you:
 - a) believe this to be the truth;
 - b) see Jesus' resurrection as a story fabricated by early Christians;
 - c) not see why Jesus' resurrection is significant;
 - d) other: ____

2. "God uses unlikely and unwilling witnesses" here to spread his gospel message. Do you believe this to be the case today? How have you witnessed God using normal – or perhaps even marginalized – people to proclaim the gospel? How does and how can God use you as a bearer of the truth of the gospel and resurrection?²⁰

3. As the study of the Gospel of Mark concludes, who do you say that Jesus is? How will you respond to Jesus?

4. How can we encourage one another (in our small group and/or at Waterstone more broadly) in following Jesus?

5. What do you plan to take away from this study of Mark?

Group Prayer

Share prayer requests and pray for one another.

Conclude this study of Mark by praying part of a familiar Easter hymn by Charles Wesley (1707-1788). Feel free to sing this prayer if your group is musically inclined.

Group leader begins, and a different group member takes a turn praying when marked "Different Reader." The group together reads sections marked "All."

Leader: Christ the Lord is ris'n today!

All: Alleluia!

Leader: Sons of men and angels say,

All: Alleluia!

Leader: Raise your joys and triumphs high,

All: Alleluia!

Leader: Sing, ye heav'ns, and earth, reply,

All: Alleluia!

Different Reader: Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!

Different Reader: Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!

Different Reader: Once He died our souls to save, Alleluia!

Different Reader: Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!

Leader: Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia!

All: Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!

Leader: Death in vain forbids His rise, Alleluia!

All: Christ hath opened paradise, Alleluia!

Leader: We praise you, O Lord of life! For in your resurrection you have vanquished death and given us true life. We commit our lives to you and to walk in the light of your resurrection.

In the precious name of Jesus Christ we pray,

All: Amen and Amen!

Additional Resources

I Corinthians 15.

Keller, Timothy. *A Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008. Specifically see Chapter 13, "The Reality of the Resurrection."

Wright, N.T. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. New York: Harper Collins, 2008.

"The idea of resurrection occurring apart from the will and activity of God is unthinkable for a Jew. The resurrection of Jesus means, then, that God gave his approval to the claims of Jesus and that these claims, which would be blasphemous unless Jesus really is the Son of Man, are true."

Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*, 3rd Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013, 612.

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- 1 N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 116.
 - 2 Walter Wangerin, Jr, *Reliving the Passion: Meditations on the Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus as Recorded in the Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 173-176.
 - 3 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 261; Bock, *Mark*, 381.
 - 4 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 498, 497; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 591; Bock, *Mark*, 384.
 - 5 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 259.
 - 6 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 499.
 - 7 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 491; Bock, *Mark*, 380.
 - 8 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 587; Bock, *Mark*, 380.
 - 9 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 588-589; "The empty tomb does not prove the resurrection of Jesus, of course, and the NT never adduces it as proof of the resurrection. Already in the early church opponents of the resurrection explained the empty tomb on the ground that Jesus' body had been stolen (Matt 28:13). The empty tomb is only one of several facts attending the resurrection. It is not the empty tomb that proves the resurrection, but the resurrection that makes the empty tomb meaningful. The empty tomb testifies that the Jesus who died as a bodily being was raised as a bodily being, and it is the historical place and point in time that marks the transition between his two orders of existence. Along with early Christianity as a whole, Mark is interested in faith in the resurrected Jesus, not in proofs of his existence. It is an encounter with the resurrected Lord, not the empty tomb, that produces faith" (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 494-495).
 - 10 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 261; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 589.
 - 11 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 261.
 - 12 Bock, *Mark*, 379.
 - 13 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 492, 504; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 589.
 - 14 Some scholars think that 16:8 is perhaps not the original ending, either, and that the last few sentences of Mark's manuscript have been lost over time (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 501-503).
 - 15 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 259; 262.
 - 16 "the cause of the women's fear is the presence and action of God at the tomb of Jesus. They recognized the significance of the empty tomb" (Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 590).
 - 17 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 592.
 - 18 Bock, *Mark*, 382; "When they see the empty tomb and hear the angel's message, they abandon God's call and flee in terror and amazement. But the gospel does not end in silence as 16:8 might lead us to expect. Someone had to tell the story, because it did not end with fearful disciples. When their knees stopped shaking and their tongues began to loosen, they looked at one another and asked what they had witnessed. Then, empowered by the risen Christ, these unlikely and unwilling witnesses proclaimed the good news of God's reign (Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 263-264).
 - 19 Bock, *Mark*, 382; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 500; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 262.
 - 20 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 263.

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