



# Reflections on Mark

Don Merritt

## Introduction

I'm really not sure what to call this; is it a book, a Bible study, a devotional, a small group study, a commentary? To be honest, it isn't quite any of those things, yet it has aspects of all three. It's hardly long enough to be a book; it isn't complete enough to be a commentary. It's not quite a devotional, but it could be used for devotions. It's not quite a Bible study, but it could easily be used for that, too. If you're creative, it could also be used to teach a class, but it isn't in a proper format to be curriculum.

One thing differs here from the first two collections I have released. For this collection, I have not included discussion questions, but anyone could make up their own for use in a discussion or class setting.

This little "document" is freely given to you. By all means, feel free to share it with others for free. Please do not use any of this for commercial purposes! Make use of whatever helps you grow in your relationship with our Lord and anything here that isn't helpful, by all means set it aside. Helping other believers in their walk with Christ is my only purpose here!

All blessings to you in Christ!

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## ***Introduction to Mark***

The best way I know to introduce this book is to compare it with the other three Gospels. Of course, it is one of the three synoptic Gospels, meaning that it is written with a chronological perspective, moving logically from one scene to the next. John, the non-synoptic Gospel, is not written in chronological order which makes it seem more difficult to many readers. It's often helpful for students of the Bible to recognize that each of the four Gospels is written for a different audience. This aspect of differing audience has a unique result for each book that, when understood, makes the books easier to understand in relation to each other; the result being that they are in harmony with each other rather than in conflict. Each one tells the truth about the life of Jesus, and yet they don't all tell exactly the same stories in exactly the same way, but when you understand that they are written for culturally diverse groups of people, each coming to understand Christ from their own points of view, we can not only comprehend them more easily, but we can also take an important lesson about sharing the message of Christ with diverse people in our own day.

Matthew was written for a Jewish audience, and this is why it is full of instances where its author points out what was done to fulfill prophecy. You don't see much of that in Mark and Luke, since their audiences didn't know the Jewish prophets all that well. Luke was written by a Greek so, go figure, he wrote it for a largely Greek audience. It is full of descriptions that are similar to those found in Greek literary and philosophical traditions, of actions followed by explanations of the actions with Jesus playing the role (so to speak) of the Master, and the rest of us being the disciple (student) who is being taught the lesson.

John is unique in that he wrote to the mass audience, but unlike things written for mass consumption today, it isn't dumbed down to the least common denominator, it is kicked up to a heavenly point of view. I would suspect John's approach would have been confusing to many gentiles in his day, but in our day it ties all of humanity together as one family.

Now we come to Mark. While the Jewish perspective was centered on law and prophecy, and the Greek mind tended towards philosophy and intellect, Mark appealed to the man of action, and in the first century there was a very large audience composed of people who came from a culture that had little time for speculations about ancient prophecies and philosophy, for they were busy running the world; the Romans. Interesting isn't it, that if you look carefully, you'll find these three paralleled today in Christianity.

Mark's gospel is a busy book full of action. He flies right past the Sermon on the Mount, preferring to move on to the next miracle, and he describes miracles with a flourish not found in the other gospels. If you like action, you'll love Mark!

How did that happen?

Unlike Matthew and John, Mark was not an eyewitness to most of the scenes he described, in fact there is only circumstantial evidence that he was present at any of them. He was not an apostle, and he isn't associated as one of the "big" followers of Jesus, but he does appear in Scripture.

John Mark, our author, was the son of a well-known woman named Mary, who was a leading follower of Jesus at the time of the death of James. Her home in Jerusalem was an early

gathering place for the disciples there, and is the place Peter returned to when he was released from prison in Acts 12:12 ff. where "John who is also called Mark" is mentioned. Mary was also the sister of Barnabas of the Jerusalem church. (Col. 4:10; Acts 4:5-6, 37; 9:26-27; 11:22-24) Thus, from the earliest days of the church, and maybe before that, John Mark would have frequently found himself in the company of the apostles who had been closely associated with Jesus during His earthly ministry. Can you imagine being a youth hanging out with the apostles day after day in your own home?

As the years went by, John Mark was closely associated as the assistant for Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25; 13:5; 15:37-39) and later with Peter (1 Peter 5:13) and again with Paul (Col. 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11). Certainly, then, Mark had every opportunity to have heard the eyewitness accounts of the apostles, and showed that he was far from a casual believer.

Some more recent scholars have suggested that Mark couldn't have written an inspired account of the life of Jesus. I'm sure these scholars are much smarter than I am, because I can't see the point of such speculations, unless Mark hasn't reported something in a way that it fits nicely into a particular scholar's theological conclusions, and if that is the reason, then it's a bad reason. It also strikes me as odd that a "Christian" scholar can't see that God can use anyone for his purposes, as though one must go to the "right" school to be taken seriously. Luke wasn't an eyewitness either, but few, if any, question his gospel, since Luke was with Paul. John Mark was with *all of the apostles* and spent years with both Paul and Peter. In fact, many believe he wrote this account with Peter's oversight.

You are free to think what you will of course, but as for me, Mark is as valid an account as Matthew, Luke or John, and is well worth our careful attention and study.

## Chapter 1

### ***Off to a Fast Start!***

[Mark 1:1-8](#)

Parallel Texts: Matthew 3:1-12; Luke 3:1-18

As you can see, Mark doesn't get into the birth of Christ, or the genealogies or anything else, he jumps in right where the action begins with John the Baptist preparing the way. Ironically for him, he does so with his only extended quote from an Old Testament prophet, in this case Isaiah. Notice how Mark quotes the prophet and immediately follows with "and so..." It's almost as if God spoke through Isaiah, and bam, there was John preaching. As you will come to recognize, this is Mark's style: action and facts, then more action and more facts.

Notice that John is preaching a baptism of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (1:4) As you know, this revolutionary development will get the attention of the Jewish authorities, who are not only well aware of the prophecy in question, but they are also well aware of the fact that in the Law of Moses, there was no such thing as "baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

In verse 5, we encounter Mark's first use of hyperbole when he writes that the "whole Judean countryside" and "all the people of Jerusalem" went out and confessed their sins and were baptized by John. Sounds like a big claim to me, and frankly I can't quite imagine the Pharisees and the High Priest hopping in the Jordan with John. I think Mark was saying that many did so. You'll see a lot of this as we go on.

In the remainder of this passage, Mark describes the eccentric costume of John and then gets to the important fact that John was only the messenger sent to prepare the way for the One who was to be sent. This is a very important detail because everybody knew that the Messiah was coming. Not only the gospels tell us this, but also the historical sources from that time, for Daniel's prophecies were well-known. Unlike many scholars of our own time, they could do the math in relation to Daniel's seventy sevens in Daniel chapter 9; they knew Messiah was just about to appear and were on the lookout.

Now Mark has set the stage, and we will meet Jesus for the first time when we pick up at verse 9. Next time.

### ***Jesus Appears on the Scene***

Mark 1:9-11

Parallel texts: Matthew 3:13-17; Like 3:21-22

Mark continues the action, after having described briefly the ministry of John the Baptist, here comes Jesus down from Nazareth to be baptized by John. Since John was operating near Jerusalem, Jesus would have traveled about 80 miles on foot through some pretty rough terrain to join John at the Jordan. Mark doesn't record the exchange between the two that Matthew describes, probably because it wouldn't mean much to a Roman, but he does record the most important and significant aspects of this scene.

*Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

Mark 1:10-11

First, you no doubt noted the words as Jesus "was coming up out of the water". I point this out because it indicates that Jesus and John had been down in the water in the first place. As if the meaning of baptize (Greek *baptiso* "to immerse") weren't enough to indicate what is going on here, Mark describes a scene in which immersion has taken place in the river, and thus Jesus had to come up out of the water.

Next, Mark shows us an amazing scene. Jesus has just been baptized, and the Holy Spirit descends upon Him like a dove. you have seen other passages in the Bible where the Holy Spirit is described as being like fire, but here the Spirit is like a dove; gentle, harmless and peaceful. This makes perfect sense since Jesus' ministry was not about condemnation or judgment, but rather it was a ministry of reconciliation, peace and love. I also like to point out that the Holy Spirit descended after He was baptized, just as the Holy Spirit is gifted to the Christian after baptism (Acts 2:38). Then, another amazing thing: The voice of the Father from heaven, announcing that Jesus is the Son for the first time.

Three times in the New Testament, the divine voice of the Father is heard. Here, at the transfiguration, and in Jesus' last week in John 12:28. In this case, the Father not only announces that Jesus is His Son, but indicates that the Father is well-pleased with Jesus... why now?

Jesus has been baptized to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15) and it strikes me that this would imply an obedient act on Jesus' part. The Father is pleased *now* when Jesus has been obedient. This is not to say that Jesus wasn't pleasing in God's sight before, but remember that Jesus has come to the earth do His Father's will, and this act of obedience is an example to us of doing His will.

We should also note here, that in this scene are all three Persons of the Godhead: Father (voice from heaven), Son (Jesus coming up out of the water) and Holy Spirit (descending like a dove). You just don't see a scene like this very often!

## ***Mark Wastes No Time***

### *Jesus Tempted in the Wilderness*

Mark 1:12-13

Parallel Texts: Matthew 4: 1-11; Luke 4:1-13

### *Jesus Returns to Galilee*

Mark 1:14

Parallel Texts: Matthew 4:12; Luke 3:19-20; John 4:1-4

### *Jesus Teaches in Galilee*

Mark 1:15

Parallel Texts: Matthew 4:17; Luke 4:14-15

### *Jesus Calls Disciples*

Mark 1:16-20

Parallel Texts: Matthew 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11

I don't know if you've been reading the verses I've listed above, but if you have, you can see just how pithy this gospel is. See where Matthew and Luke are by the end of this, while Mark has only written a few verses for these incidents? Matthew is well into chapter 4 and Luke is well into chapter 5 while Mark is not halfway through chapter 1! I keep having to remind myself that I'm covering Mark, and not the life of Jesus, so tempted am I to fill in the blanks...

Mark does, however, give us something really interesting to sink our teeth into in verse 16 ff.

This is His first command to His disciples: "Follow me." I always enjoy pointing out that His ministry begins in earnest with "Follow Me" and ends with "Go and make disciples". In between these two commands Jesus makes disciples and saves the world. If you stop and think about that, you will surely gain wisdom, for you will be looking right directly at the eternal purpose of God.

Another interesting aspect to this story is that when Jesus walks up to these guys and says "Follow Me," they actually drop everything and obey His command! What would I do if some 30-year-old kid walked up to me and said that? If I was in a really good mood I might say, "And you are... who exactly?"

These guys just dropped their nets and answered His call, and when you read that they dropped their nets, understand that those nets were their profession not their amusement. Jesus has called you and me to do a number of things. He's called us to love one another; do we drop our nets and follow? He has called us to make disciples, do we drop our nets and follow? I'm sure you can see where this is headed, and no, we usually put up a bit of a fuss with Him when He calls us to do something.

Yes, even though Mark rushed through some things, there's always a zinger lingering somewhere!

## ***Jesus in the Synagogue***

Mark 1:21-28

Parallel Text: Luke 4:31-37

Jesus went to the synagogue at Capernaum and taught there. Mark doesn't tell us what He taught, just that He did teach; the exact content isn't the issue in this text, the reaction of the people is the real message. The people were amazed not so much by His content, apparently, but at His manner.

I know a preacher who is more than capable of bringing a brilliant sermon to his group, but as he does so, it is obvious that he is uncomfortable, nervous and insecure. By the time his people have finished their lunch, they have forgotten what he taught only an hour earlier. Other preachers I know present really weak content with confidence and an air of command that their groups recall and consider greatly inspiring. Jesus had both content and an air of confidence and authority; He really made an impact on the people and that was quite a contrast with what they were used to hearing.

Then there's this guy...

The guy was possessed by an "impure spirit." This impure spirit starts talking to Jesus:

*"What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"*

Mark 1:24

Now this is something you don't see every day! Did you notice that the spirit is the only one in the place who knows who he's talking to? Oh yes, they know exactly who Jesus is, and they tremble. They also know who indwells you and me, and they tremble!

Jesus responds to the spirit by telling it to be quiet and come out of the man.... and the spirit obeys; authority again.

Before this, the people were amazed, now they are beyond amazed:

*The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.*

Mark 1:27-28

Take a moment and consider the reaction of the people. If you consider these words carefully, you should be more amazed than those people were. Jesus had just taught in the synagogue with authority. Then he was accosted by an impure spirit who recognized Jesus as the "Holy One of God" and Jesus told the spirit to shut up and get lost... and the spirit obeys, and the people say, "What is this? A new Teaching - and with authority!"

The people had heard Jesus teach, and they were impressed by His authority. Then they saw His authority confirmed in a way no one had ever seen before. They also heard the spirit tell

exactly who Jesus was, but all they could comprehend was teaching and authority. Doesn't this remind you of something common in our time?

"Jesus was a great moral teacher, but not the Son of God."

There is a lesson for us to learn here: Never underestimate the capacity of human beings to miss the obvious. (You may quote me on that!)

Even so, the word spread about Jesus...

### ***The Kingdom is at Hand***

Mark 1:29-45

#### *Healing People*

Mark 1:29-34

Parallel Texts: Matt. 8:14-17; Luke 4:38-41

#### *Galilee Touring*

Mark 1:35-39

Parallel Texts: Matt. 4:23-25; Luke 4:42-44

#### *Growing Crowds*

Mark 1:40-45

Parallel Texts: Matt. 8:2-4; Luke 5:12-16

If Jesus were to make a tour like this today, a promoter might call it "The Kingdom Tour".

Certainly His early ministry in Galilee was tumultuous, with ever-growing crowds of admirers, lines of the sick and lame, the demon possessed... and of course His critics.

More than anything else, Mark , with his brief glimpses of one incident after another, paints for us, a picture of the Kingdom Tour as it advances from one Galilean town to the next. With this somewhat disjointed picture, we start to see a pattern of sorts, images connected together by a theme. We know that the theme is "The Kingdom is at Hand" and the trends are that Jesus preaches the Kingdom, heals the sick and lame, drives out demons and crowds grow larger. They grow so large that Jesus can no longer enter the towns, but instead meets the people in the nearby countryside.

This Kingdom Jesus is preaching brings with it God's righteousness, a new energetic life, forgiveness of sin and healing. There is something different going on here, nothing like this has swept through Galilee before; this has an other-worldliness about it. It is hard for any of us to reflect upon this period and see the Kingdom as a mere metaphor, or a simple abstract idea, no this is different. Think about the healing that is going on; not only is sickness being swept away

in Jesus' path, but so is infirmity and even death itself. It is as though this Jesus can undo the consequences of sin.

Yet, this isn't the only healing that is being done right out in the open. Jesus is driving demons out of people! These unclean spirits that have taken over human lives are being given orders to cease and desist... and they know exactly who they are dealing with; Jesus is acting to prevent them from telling the people who He is; why? Where did these demons come from? Were they always there? I'll post a Bonus Post about demon possession soon, but for now let's just say that we can add spiritual cleansing to Kingdom activities in this amazing picture of the "Kingdom Tour."

However you slice it, Jesus was making a splash, and He is attracting attention as the news of His tour reaches Jerusalem, where the authorities will want to find out just what is going on up there in Galilee, from whence nothing good ever comes, as the action moves into the second chapter tomorrow morning...

## Chapter 2

### ***Jesus Meets His Critics***

Mark 2:1-12

Parallel Texts: Matthew 9:2-8; Luke 5:17-26

In this passage, Jesus has returned to Capernaum from His Kingdom Tour, and the people are excited to have Him back in town. During this period, Capernaum is His 'home base'. As the crowd grew with the usual curious listeners, sick and damaged people, it became impossible for everyone to gain entry into the house where Jesus was staying as He preached, and a very enterprising group of men climbed up to the roof, bringing a paralyzed man on a stretcher with them. They opened the roof door which was a common feature in those flat-roofed houses, and lowered the paralyzed man into the room where Jesus was teaching.

When Jesus saw this, He went over to the man on the stretcher and told him that his sins were forgiven.

There was a group of teachers of the law in the room, who may have come from Jerusalem to investigate the report that had reached the city about the Kingdom Tour, and these guys were pretty amazed at what they saw. It occurred to them that Jesus had just made a mistake in telling the unfortunate man his sins were forgiven, because only God can forgive sins: Blasphemy... Gotcha!

*Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"*

Mark 2:8-12

I love this part! Jesus, knowing their thoughts goes over to these guys and asks a question: So boys, what's easier, to tell this guy his sins are forgiven, or to tell him to get up, pick up his mat and walk?

Who says Jesus had no sense of humor?

Then, He went back to the paralyzed man and told him to get up, take his mat and walk... and that's just what the guy did!

I can just imagine what those old boys from Jerusalem thought then... hilarious! Boy, did they have a report for the bigwigs back home.

Of course everyone was amazed at what they had witnessed, but I wonder if they fully comprehended the scene. Right in front of the teachers of the law, Jesus had forgiven a man's sins, the teachers were correct in what they were thinking, for only God can forgive sins. Jesus read their thoughts; a little miracle nobody seemed to notice, and went right for the jugular, so to speak. He told a paralyzed man to get up and walk, and the man was made whole again, and

did just that. Thus, Jesus had taken upon Himself God's role to forgive, and then backed it up by making the man whole physically.

Wholeness, spiritually and physically: Jesus removed the consequences of sin, at least symbolically, right in front of their eyes. To state what happened in another way, Jesus had just shown the whole crowd that He was the Son of God... and the teachers of the law, by definition if nothing else, would have had to know that.

So, what do you think was in their report to HQ?

### ***Jesus and Sinners***

Mark 2:13-17

Parallel Texts: Matthew 9:9; Luke 5:27-28

Still in Galilee, Jesus calls another disciple, and this time He has a questionable choice: Levi (Matthew) the tax collector. Tax collectors are none too popular in our day, but back then they were outright crooks in most cases. They would be informed of the amount they had to collect, and whatever they collected over and above that amount would be theirs to keep. Oh yes, this was all nice and legal under Roman law. So say you are a tax collector and you are supposed to collect \$100.00 from 10 people. Let's see, if you can get \$10.00 from each one, you could turn the money over to the authorities and be done, but your family would go hungry. If you collected \$ 12.50 each, you'd make \$25.00 and maybe that would be fair, but if you could force them to pay \$150.00 each, even better!

So, let's see; where was I? Oh yes, they were unpopular indeed!

Jesus called Levi to discipleship, and then they go to a party with tax collectors and other unsavory characters: The stage is set for another round with His critics.

Notice that once again, Jesus called a disciple, and the disciple followed, leaving everything behind immediately to do so. In this case, Levi, who was well-to-do threw a dinner party for Jesus that night, inviting all of his friends. Jesus did not tell Levi that he had to attend class, do penance or somehow work his way into favor; Levi did not need to get his act together before he could follow Jesus, instead Jesus called, Levi obeyed.

Then, this dinner party!

*While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*

*On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Mark 2:15-17

I can well imagine, and even sympathize with the thinking of the Pharisees, after all most of us are quite used to this kind of thinking; Levi and his friends weren't "suitable" people at all; they

were at the very bottom of the social order. Yet Jesus came that such as these could be saved; in our day, these are exactly the ones who need to hear about Jesus.

Here's a question: If you and I don't reach out to "tax collectors and prostitutes" with the message of Christ, then who will; the Pharisees? From this text, it would seem that Pharisees are not likely to get the job done.

### ***You Should be Fasting!***

Mark 2:18-22

Parallel Texts: Matthew 9:14-17; Luke 5:33-39

The next scene Mark jumps to is one in which we find both John's disciples and the Pharisees fasting, while Jesus and His disciples are going on as normal. Curious about this, one of John's disciples asks about it; why aren't you fasting? There is a fairly clear implication that they should be, at least in this man's mind, but Jesus doesn't think so.

Jesus gives the man three answers to one question, beginning in verse 19. Likening Himself to a bridegroom, and His disciples to guests of the bridegroom, Jesus indicates to the man that fasting is not appropriate at that current time, for they are in a mood of celebration, yet the day will come when the bridegroom is no longer with His guests, and they will have occasion to fast then.

The second and third answers to the question begin at verse 21:

*"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."*

Mark 2:21-22

In essence, Jesus gives two short parables that are designed to draw a profound distinction between the ministry of John, the Law and the ministry and purpose of Christ. John's ministry was limited to prepare the way for Jesus, it was really a transitional ministry, under the Law. Jesus, on the other hand, had an entirely different purpose, for His was the purpose of fulfilling the Law and ushering in an entirely new order; the New Covenant. There was nothing about the ministry of Jesus that would serve to patch the old garment of the Law, He was not there to refill an old wineskin; the old garment and the old wineskin had served their purpose and Jesus would replace them both.

There would be no fasting! The Kingdom was at hand in the Person of Jesus Himself. While He was on the scene, fasting was not appropriate.

I often wonder if I harp on this point too much, the point being that the New Covenant has entirely replaced the Old. Am I simply riding a "hobby-horse"?

I think not: This is a key point in the Christian faith; the Law is over. Just as John's ministry was transitional in nature, preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus, the Law was transitional in

nature, illustrating the reality that was to come through Christ in the New Covenant; that is what Jesus is telling this man in the story, and it is the point we need to comprehend as well.

### ***Lord of the Sabbath***

Mark 2:23-28

Parallel Texts: Matthew 8:1-8; Luke 6:1-5

Mark has shifted the scene to the countryside. Jesus and the disciples, and apparently some Pharisees, are walking through grain fields on the Sabbath. They are hungry and the disciples pluck a few heads of grain to eat as they go along, and the Pharisees object, for it is unlawful to harvest a field on the Sabbath. The law on this point is contained in Exodus 20:10 if you'd like to read it just to bring in a little context. By the way, if you do look it up, you will notice that the law doesn't say this. It says you shall do no work. Were the disciples actually working? Well, that is the real question.

As the years went by, it became apparent that Exodus 20:10 was subject to interpretation, and many well-intentioned leaders believed that there was a great potential for misunderstanding Exodus 20:10, so they adopted a very long list of additional rules to help people avoid an unintentional violation of the Sabbath. This list of rules is not actually part of the law, but as more time went by, it was treated as if it were the law itself; this is what the Pharisees were actually referring to.

In verses 25-26, Jesus cites a well-known example of David feeding his men food reserved by the law for the exclusive use of the priests when necessity required it, with the implication that necessity required the disciples' actions that the Pharisees were objecting to. He concludes His answer in the following verses:

*Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."*

Mark 2:27-28

I wish I could have been there to see the look on the faces of those poor Pharisees when they heard that!

As you know, there are those critics out there who claim that Jesus never said He was divine. Even if that were true, He sure implied it strongly on many occasions, and this is another of those. If the Sabbath was made for man, and that makes the Son of Man the lord over the Sabbath, then it is because He's also the Lord over Man.

Yep, there's another report back to HQ I wish I could read!

## Chapter 3

### ***Sabbath, Controversy and More Followers***

Mark 3:1-6

Parallel Texts: Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11

After the scene in the last section where Jesus announces that He is the Lord of the Sabbath, Mark recounts another Sabbath scene, this time in a synagogue, where Jesus heals a man with an injured hand. It seems that there were some present who were interested in causing problems, and Jesus, no doubt being aware of this, asked the injured man to step forward:

*Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.*

Mark 3:4

I'm guessing they also remained hopeful...

Jesus healed the man. Mark tells us in verse 5 that Jesus was angry and distressed at the hard hearts of those who sought an excuse to act against Him... and afterwards, they began to plot to kill Him. Mark tells us that the group consisted of Pharisees and Herodians, who were of the party of Herod, the Vassal king of Judea, son of the guy who slaughtered the infants in Bethlehem.

Mark 3:7-12

Parallel Text: Matthew 12:13-21

With the plot to kill Him underway, Jesus and His disciples go to the Sea Of Galilee, followed by ever-growing crowds of people. Many, maybe hundreds pushed to be close to Him, hoping to be healed, and security became an issue with the pressing of bodies and precautions had to be taken, so great was the rush of the crowds.

People possessed by impure spirits became a problem, as the spirits within them cried out that He was the Son of God, and Jesus silenced them. Can it be any wonder that both the Pharisees and Herodians wanted Jesus out of the way? Neither Herod nor his partisans wanted him deposed and replaced by a legitimate king. The Pharisees, pose another interesting question for us to consider.

It has long been my view, that the Pharisees, of all people should have known exactly who and what they were dealing with in Jesus of Nazareth. As I've mentioned before, they knew the prophecies and they knew the timing; they saw the prophecies playing out with Jesus, and though it may sound odd to point this out, they not only had the testimony of John, but that of the impure spirits regarding His identity.

It seems apparent to me, however, that they did not see the Messiah they wanted in Jesus, for they could care less about redemption, they wanted power. Jesus was not the king who would defeat the Romans and rule a powerful and influential Israel with the Pharisees being the center of Jewish life. No sir, they saw a Kingdom that was not an earthly one developing before them,

one that would undermine their position instead of strengthening it, so it had to be stopped at all costs.

We all might be well advised to carefully consider what lessons God has for us today in all of this...

### **Very Strange**

Mark 3:20-35

Parallel Texts: Matthew 12:22-37, 46-50; Luke 11:14-23; 8:19-21

After Jesus appoints the Twelve, things start to become strange; something isn't quite right in this story.

Jesus and the disciples are in a house, and the crowd pushes in, there are so many people, Jesus and His party can't finish their meal. Jesus' Mother and brothers hear He is there and set out to "take charge" of Him, for they are sure He's crazy. His family might have something in common with my family... but this isn't the picture most of us expect to hear at this point; Jesus out of His mind? Why right now, He's a rock star! (figuratively speaking)

But wait, there's more!

*And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."*

Mark 3:22

You know, these guys really should have thought about what they said before they said it...

*So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house. Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin."*

Mark 3:23-29

This is a masterpiece, a classic of rhetorical discourse, a thing of utter beauty.

Borrowing from this paragraph, Abraham Lincoln crafted his most important speech, the one that lost him the senate in 1858, but won him the White House in 1860. Lincoln isn't the only one who has ripped this little bit of oratory off in the centuries since. Not only did Jesus annihilate their accusation, not only did He crush their credibility with those

they spewed this foolishness to, He showed them that they would spend their future in very warm climes.

He also has taught us that we should avoid attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to the work of the devil. Mark makes this clear in the next verse, pointing out that these guys had claimed Jesus was possessed by an impure spirit.

There is one more odd thing in this story. Remember, Jesus' family was on their way to "take charge" of Him... well they've arrived. They send someone inside to tell Jesus they were outside, and Jesus doesn't come running:

*"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.*

*Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."*

Mark 3:33-35

This is a tough few verses, but we should understand this concept. I don't think it would be fair to say that Jesus didn't love His earthly family; Jesus loves everyone and died for all of us, so great is His love. Yet at that moment, well-meaning as His family was, they were working *against* God's will. In Christ, we are God's sons and daughters, we are Jesus' brothers and sisters, members of the family. Outside of this context, we place ourselves in opposition to Him; not good.

We know that this changed, and His family came to become His followers, so this isn't like what He told those teachers of the Law earlier, but it is something we should be aware of and guard against.

Well, for me anyway, this has been an odd passage, as though there is more going on that would have met the eye on that occasion. Next time we'll be moving into chapter four, and a more familiar view of Jesus teaching.

### ***Bonus Topic: Demon Possessed!***

Off hand, I can't think of a Bible topic that makes for a better horror movie than demon possession. After all, by its very nature it's scary, the idea of some unseen evil force taking over the body and consciousness of an innocent victim is downright creepy. Then of course, they can make a person behave in a bizarre manner, spewing green fluids across the room, shaking, screaming... Yep, great stuff for a horror flick, but is there any thread of reality to all this?

My best answer is really a lawyer's answer: "Well, it all depends."

Maybe that really isn't the best question.

A better question would be this one: "Why does demon possession suddenly burst on the scene in the gospels, carry through Acts and then seem to fade after that?"

How many cases of demon possession are recorded in the Old Testament? Don't be too quick to say there's a bunch of them, for the whole concept of demon possession is rare indeed, at least as it is presented in the gospels. So why in the gospels?

It isn't easy to find direct Scriptural guidance for that question; most of the verses cited on the subject require us to draw inferences, rather than providing direct commentary. Yet there is evidence if we are willing to consider historical context and discern what is going on... and even then we will be drawing inferences that can't be proven in the usual classical sense, so I would personally offer them as the subject of thoughtful reflection as opposed to Biblical "proof."

What is it that the gospels are telling us about; what is going on? That's an easy one, for they tell us about the arrival and ministry of Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ. If you are the Enemy, are you happy to welcome Jesus to the earth?

Knowing why Jesus has come, you would probably not be thrilled, for the battle is on!

So far in Mark, we've seen Jesus in Galilee on His Kingdom Tour, and we have also seen some instances of people possessed by "impure spirits" who are drawing attention away from His message, they are providing a distraction. They are also afraid.

In Mark 3 we even see some teachers of the Law who ascribe the Holy Spirit's work through Jesus as the work of demons... that is *quite* the distraction. Can you begin to see the strategy here? Demon possessed people crying out that Jesus is the Son of God; they were telling the truth... but who is going to take *their word for it*? A politician in an election year wants endorsements, but only a complete fool wants the endorsement of the KKK!

Jesus is fighting a spiritual war throughout His ministry, and in the end, He is nailed to a cross to shut Him up, the biggest strategic miscalculation in history, and Jesus wins His battle. A short time later, the church launches at Pentecost, and almost from the start, the same tactics are used against the fledgling church, but the Apostles, like Jesus have command of the situation, and demons are chased out of the afflicted. Eventually the Enemy changes tactics and cases of demon possession once again are very rare, at least as they are seen in the gospels.

Is there demon possession now?

Again I'll give the lawyer's answer: "It all depends..."

## Chapter 4

### ***Jesus Teaches in Parables***

Mark 4:1-20

Parallel Texts: Matthew 13:1-23; Luke 8:1-15

With the beginning of chapter four, we see a shift in Mark's narrative into a battery of parables. Parables are interesting things, little stories that teach a moral lesson. They are not literal, and the stories themselves are not intended to be understood literally; they are instead, metaphors. The literal interpretation, for you literal fans, of a parable is that it is a metaphor... just so we are clear.

Teachers use parables to teach moral lessons in a non-threatening way, so that each listener may perceive the part of the parable that applies to his or her situation, without the teacher needing to point fingers at any certain individual, which enables the lesson to sink in more deeply than if it needed to be filtered through a defensive perimeter. Jesus made frequent use of parables, but He is certainly not alone in doing so; there are parables in both the Old and New Testaments, used by multiple writers, as well as in secular history. In American history, Abraham Lincoln is especially famous for his clever use of parables in both legal and political argumentation. Indeed, modern-day speakers still use parables in their teaching; Ronald Reagan was known to make frequent use of them, for instance.

The parable of the sower is the first in this series, and is commonly known in churches today. For our purposes, I'll let you read the text and then we'll talk about Jesus' explanation when you get back...

Jesus explains His parable to a smaller group after His teaching session from the boat beginning in verse 10. Isn't it interesting that He begins to explain by quoting Isaiah 6? Jesus ties all of this to His preaching on the Kingdom. For those who are outside of His Kingdom, these matters will be a mystery, but for those within His kingdom, they will be plain, and now the Isaiah quote. Doesn't this remind you of Paul's discussion of how the things of God are but "foolishness" to the world, and the wisdom of this world is but foolishness to God?

Jesus goes on to elaborate on His metaphor, by describing the various soils that the farmer's seed contacts, how the birds gobble up the seed on the path, and the lack of roots in the rocky soil and how that causes the seed to sprout quickly and then shrivel and die when the hot sun shines down on the young plants. Then He points out how the seed that falls in good soil develops roots and withstands the sun, growing to maturity.

I've heard countless sermons that focus on the rocky soil and that have gone on to discuss those who come to faith, are very excited and then fall away. I haven't had the pleasure of listening to very many who actually noticed the fact that in verse 11, Jesus tied this into a *Kingdom context*. His focus wasn't so much on the products of the rocky soil, but rather on what happens in good soil: Those seeds grow to maturity, and then produce more seeds. Some seeds produce 30 new seeds, or 60, or even 100. These are His disciples, who in turn produce more disciples for the Kingdom, some 30, some 60, and some 100. Disciples who make more disciples are the object of all of this, not the rocky soil and falling away...

What kind of soil are we planted in? Can a mentor (disciple) work with that soil and remove the rocks that are in the soil of a "younger" brother?

Interesting question, wouldn't you say?

### ***Two Short Parables***

Mark 4:21-25

Parallel Text: Like 8:16-18

This brief section contains two more short ones, the Parable of the Lampstands and the Warning for Hearers. First, let's talk about lamps...

Lamps and lampstands are used several times in the New Testament as references to the Truth. Certainly the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ was something that had been hidden since the Garden of Eden, which is probably why Paul referred to it as a mystery. The time was soon to come when everything would be made known, and Jesus' Apostles were the ones who would make it known fully, beginning at Pentecost. Clearly, His message is that there will be no secrets when the time comes.

The second short parable is slightly more difficult to catch the meaning of. We should see right off that when Jesus says that "whoever has will be given more..." in verse 25, Jesus isn't talking about material possessions.

*"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."*

Mark 24-25

The "measure" mentioned in verse 24 is the care you use in considering what you hear. So, "Consider carefully" what you hear means that we should listen very carefully and really consider it; great care in consideration of what we hear, will yield great benefits to our understanding of the truths that we will shine for the world to see about His gospel. If we take little or no care in this, the truth will do us no good at all, and that could have tragic results.

Thus, we can see that whoever has (truth) will be given more (truth).

Have you ever listened to a sermon that was really great, and had the guy in front of you, who spent the whole time fidgeting and looking at his watch, then comment how much he got out of the message?

How about those times when you were busy fidgeting and looking at your watch? Were those the times you left feeling as though you really got something wonderful from the message?

Well, maybe you have, but I haven't! Nope, not when I wasn't paying attention.

## **Parable of Seeds**

*He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."*

Mark 4:26-29

Parallel Text: None

When I was in school, I was pretty good in science. When it was time for the test on seeds and plants and how plants grow, I could recall all the answers to the questions. I could say that the cells in the plants grow and divide, and that the DNA of the plant determines how they will grow and what parts form and all of that, but can I say that I *understand* how all of this happens; really understand? No.

Maybe you understand it, but I don't, even though I could explain what I learned *about it*. Maybe you noticed the subtle difference between knowing about and understanding...

In this parable, Jesus is talking about the Kingdom; after all, He is on the Kingdom Tour... He's talking up the Kingdom. I know a lot about the Kingdom, and even though there are those who know more about it than I do, I know more than most. Yet, can I say I fully understand it? No, not at all, for there is a component within the Kingdom that I cannot begin to understand fully, even though I know about it: The life power of God.

Down through the years, I have planted a great many seeds, maybe that's why I do this blogging thing... maybe that's why you do it, too. I'm not sure that I fully understand it, but I know that if you and I plant enough seeds, a crop will grow, and if we keep our eyes and ears open, we will see and hear evidence that tells us that a portion of the crop is ready for harvest. Hopefully, we'll decide to get involved in that harvest and help to bring some of it in, along with unknown numbers of others all around the globe, for this is how the Kingdom works. I have harvested many in whom others planted the seeds, and many others have brought in a harvest from seeds I planted; it's all good!

This is what Jesus is trying to teach here: Plant seeds, lots of seeds. Pay attention, and bring in the harvest when and where the time is ripe. We don't really need to understand every detail; we just need to plant, pay attention and harvest.

## **The Mustard Seed**

*Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."*

*With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.*

## Mark 4:30-34

Parallel Text: Matthew 13:31-35

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is one of the best known of Jesus' teachings; we cite it often as a teaching on faith, but that is not what this parable is about. The faith connection comes from Matthew 17:20, which is not a parable. Rather, the Parable of the Mustard Seed is about the Kingdom. I doubt that Jesus was intending to give a lecture on botany here, but He clearly used frames of reference His listeners were familiar with: Mustard seeds are tiny, yet they grow into very large plants.

That is the point of the metaphor, tiny seed becomes very big plant. How does this apply to the Kingdom?

If I was an atheist, I would be asking myself how it is possible that an obscure travelling teacher from first century Galilee is still a controversial figure all over the world twenty centuries after his death. Yes, that's right, a carpenter's son born in a stable who grew up in flyover country became the most influential figure in history, yet he never traveled more than a hundred miles or so from his birthplace.

After his death, a ragtag bunch of misfits from the provinces, just a handful of them mind you, unleashed a revolutionary idea in the minor provincial capital of Jerusalem. They were opposed by the greatest power the world had ever seen, and Mr. Atheist, you are still opposing this teaching today. How could this have happened? It's simply incredible!

As Jesus told us, the Kingdom is like that. A tiny seed grows into the largest of garden plants, big enough to give shelter to the birds; it just wouldn't seem likely at all... but there it is. It isn't reported in the text, but I have a hunch this is what Jesus explained to His disciples. Yes, they were obscure, true, they weren't important big shots from famous and powerful families, and they were young, very young. Yet, in spite of all outward appearances, they made a huge mark on history, and more importantly, they made a huge difference for God's salvation plan, in spite of all apparent circumstances.

Don't you suppose that Jesus would tell us the same thing? I doubt that the President of the United States is reading this post today, not the Prime Minister of Great Britain, nor, frankly anybody of fame or power. More likely, those who read this are just like his disciples, regular folks, no outward appearance of influence or authority. You and I are mere mustard seeds in a sense, small, not really noticed in our celebrity crazed world, yet full of life's power and potential. Should we allow it, He can and will do a mighty work in and through us and His Kingdom will grow and flourish in spite of all the odds, in spite of the naysayers, and in spite of the guffaws of others. Why?

That's an easy one: Because the Kingdom is like that!

### ***And a Storm Came***

Mark 4:35-41

Parallel Texts: Matthew 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25

Right after Jesus wrapped up His teaching in parables, He was tired and ready to leave, so the disciples joined Him in the boat, and they began to cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. As they were rowing, a storm came up and the boat was nearly swamped by the waves, as Jesus slept.

*A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"*

Mark 4:37-38

We might expect that the disciples of Jesus would have been exempt from storms, drowning and danger, but they weren't. We might expect that the Son of God is never hungry, thirsty or exhausted, but He was; He was tired enough that this great storm didn't wake Him up. In the midst of the storm, the disciples, filled with fear for their very lives, did a smart thing; they awakened Jesus and brought the situation to His attention. I'd say we can learn from this.

*He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.*

Mark 4:39

Jesus, so entirely human in the last couple of verses, was now entirely divine and intervened in nature. He was human, He was divine, and now as the Word that caused all of creation to come into existence, rebuked the storm. Pretty smart of those disciples to take their storm to Jesus, wouldn't you agree?

*He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"*

*They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"*

Mark 4:40-41

I think Jesus' remark is less a criticism of the disciples, and more an underscore of what He spent the day teaching about the Kingdom. In that little boat was the Kingdom Incarnate, along with the very men who would take the Kingdom to the world. Can't they see that God's eternal plan isn't going to fail because of a storm? Well, maybe they didn't have the whole picture just yet, but we do have the whole picture.

Here we are, little mustard seeds for God to use in a mighty way to further His Kingdom. We will endure storms throughout our lives, but those storms will not divert us from our purpose... will they? If our purpose and God's purpose are in sync, we have nothing to fear.

By the way, how's your prayer life going?

## Chapter 5

### ***Legion***

Mark 5:1-20

Parallel Texts: Matthew 8:28-33; Luke 8:26-39

Right after Jesus completed His teaching in parables, He and His disciples began to make their way across the Sea of Galilee, where they encountered a fierce storm that threatened to swamp their boat; Jesus calmed that storm. Their journey comes to its destination on the far shore, and immediately Jesus encounters a storm of a different sort, much more fierce and dangerous, for He encounters a storm of the soul in the form of a man tortured by unclean spirits. More often than not, this text is taught by getting into the details, how many soldiers in a legion, the man was naked, chains couldn't bind him, he cut himself, how many pigs were there, everyone was afraid, the guy lived in the tombs...

I'd like to focus on the big picture instead.

If you haven't read the passage, I'd suggest that you do so now; take your time and get the whole picture in your mind...

To really get the full impact of what is going on, you need to remember that Jesus just calmed the storm, and to keep in mind that in prophetic passages, the sea is often used to represent this world; always churning, tossing and tempestuous. The winds came, the waves tossed and Jesus spoke the Word and brought peace. Not only can He intervene in Nature with authority, He will bring calm to this world in due course. Then, after calming the storm, He arrives at the shore in a region inhabited primarily by gentiles, and a crazed and demon possessed man comes running.

Mark goes into great detail showing us just how far gone this fellow was, and how he was uncontrollable. He is dirty, naked and crazy. He lives near the unclean pigs and in the unclean tombs, oh yes, he pushes all of the Jewish buttons for "unclean" and is inhabited by unclean spirits!

You could almost say that this man represents the reasons for the tempest-tossed and always churning seas... as though this was representative of the spiritual causes of the condition of this world. Into all of this comes Jesus and His Kingdom Tour; we might expect a clash, right? A war, Armageddon, thunder, lightning, fireworks, armies of angels... all that apocalyptic stuff. And what to our wondering eyes should appear?

Surrender of all forces hostile to the Kingdom in Jesus' presence.

Dear reader, we should reflect on this!

It turns out that the man was inhabited by many demons. How many, whether dozens, hundreds or thousands, I don't know, the text says "many" and all of the numbers in the commentaries are speculative, but they were all surrendering to Christ, and they were driven into a herd of pigs and drowned. Of all creatures, pigs! Of course the people in town were afraid, that seems a rational thing to me, for who could grasp the full picture of what was going on at that point? Isn't it interesting that Jesus told the man, now restored, to go home and give his testimony? Yes, that is another interesting piece to the puzzle.

When this story is viewed in its context, there is so much more than we usually hear about. The context is: 1) Kingdom Tour, Jesus announcing that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand and demonstrating certain aspects of it as we have already seen. 2) Jesus has just calmed the storm, showing He has command over both Nature and this world. Now, He confronts the storm within the human soul and His enemies immediately surrender, and the human soul is restored to wholeness... and sent out to share his testimony with others. This, dear reader, is a picture of redemption and the age to come; that age is the one in which you and I are living.

Our adversary is cunning and dangerous, and we must not take him lightly. Yet, we must also not over-estimate his strength, for greater is He who is in us than he who is in this world. I always like to add one more thing here: We are also the ones who are on the offensive while our enemy is on the defensive, desperately trying to hold on to what he has, in a cause he knows will fail.

### ***Now He's Really Done It!***

Mark 5:21-43

Parallel Texts: Matthew 9:18-26; Luke 7:41-56

In this section, Jesus responds to the plea of a synagogue leader in Capernaum to go to the man's house to heal his 12-year-old daughter who was seriously ill. On the way, the crowd is pressing against Him and moves slowly along, when a woman who has been suffering for years with a bleeding disorder reaches out to touch his garment believing that she would be healed if she managed just to touch it... and succeeds. She is healed immediately.

Jesus, sensing this wants to identify who had done this, and the terrified woman kneels at His feet. Jesus tells her all is well, and then receives the news that the little girl He was going to heal has died.

When He finally arrives at the scene, He tells the people there that the girl is only sleeping, but they do not believe that. He goes in with the girl's parents and a few disciples to the girl's room, takes her hand and bids her to stand, which she does, fully restored, and asks her parents not to discuss what has happened.

It's all in a day's work on the Kingdom Tour.

On this tour, Jesus has created quite a sensation. He has preached the Kingdom, repentance and righteousness. He has healed scores of people, forgiven sins, chased out demons, and now brought a dead girl back to life. As spectacular as this is, it's only a foretaste of what is to come. Yes the Kingdom is at hand, but only at hand... just wait!

You might recall that when sin entered the world, there were consequences. The man and woman were cut off from God's presence, and now the Son of God was walking in their midst. Adam and Eve would experience suffering and pain, and now the Son was healing and removing suffering and pain. Adam and Eve had been influenced by the serpent, and the Son is now chasing away demons. Adam and Eve were cut off from the Tree of Life, but Jesus just raised a dead girl to life. Humanity carried the guilt of sins, and Jesus was forgiving sins.

The Kingdom of Heaven would undo what was done in Eden all those centuries before, the people who were following Jesus from place to place were witnessing the most amazing developments of all history, and yet did they quite understand what they were seeing?

Not exactly.

Do we fully comprehend what we are reading in these accounts?

We should comprehend it, but I guess we'll see as we move into the next chapter.

## Chapter 6

### **Scenes from home**

*Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.*

*“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.*

*Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.” He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.*

Mark 6:1-6

Parallel Texts: Matthew 13:54-58; Luke 4:16-31

A number of years ago, a family member asked me about a news story that came out of Washington. It dealt with a particular matter of which I was the project manager, and in this instance, the family member had read a news articles in the *Times* that cited an unnamed source who 'explained' the rationale of the decision involved. The family member asked me what they had been thinking when they decided the matter, and I told them. Nobody in the room believed me, after all the *Times* said... It makes perfect sense, why would you believe the project manager who was *there* when the *Times*, that wasn't there had a source without a name... who wasn't there either, that said something else? My family is convinced that either I'm never serious, or that I'm just nuts; they never believed anything I told them, not even when they asked me if the West Wing was like the TV show, and I told them that it is nothing like the TV show... how would I know what my workplace looked like?

Do you really think they work in dark offices that are illuminated by back-lit statues? No, it's nothing like that!

But then how would "little brother" know anything?

In this text, Jesus runs into this phenomenon in Nazareth. He speaks in the synagogue, the people are amazed just like the people have been all over the rest of Galilee, and then they remember who He is... the carpenter's kid. How can the carpenter's kid announce the Kingdom? No, that's nuts... it can't be! Remember the time he and those other boys...?

###

Verse 3 is controversial in some circles, naming Jesus' four brothers and mentioning that He also had sisters. It seems pretty clear to me, even though some see it differently; another example of the role played by presuppositions, because if your presupposition was that Mary and Joseph had no other children, then you will find a way to change the meaning of the words to maintain your presupposition.

###

It is often difficult to reach our own families and close friends for Christ because the relationship is too close. Yes, this can be an advantage, but just as often it's a disadvantage, and this is troubling for many, even heartbreaking. Yet we can still maintain influence, even though someone else may bring in the harvest. This frequently is maintained simply by our quiet example of faith, rather than our clever words. We don't have great detail on this, but we do know that Jesus' family, or at least many of them, came to faith later in the gospel story, and that should give us hope for our own family members who may be less than responsive to our pleas.

### ***Jesus Takes the Next Step***

Mark 6:7-13

Parallel Texts: Matthew 9:35-38; 10:1. 5-12; 11:1; Luke 9:1-6

It is very interesting that Mark puts this immediately after the previous section. Remember that we have just looked at what happened when Jesus brought the Kingdom message to His home town of Nazareth for the first time; they rejected Him. Now, He leaves Nazareth and sends out the twelve for the third circuit of Galilee in what almost seems like a dry run of what would happen later, after Pentecost.

Jesus was rejected in his home town, and uttered the famous line: "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home." (v. 4)

All through His early Galilean ministry, Jesus has preached the Kingdom, healed the sick and lame; He has driven out demons, forgiven sins and even raised a girl from the dead. During this time, He was showing what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about: Restoring people to God by the forgiveness of sins, making us whole again, chasing away the influence of evil and bringing eternal life and relationship with God. After being rejected in Nazareth, a new picture emerges of what was to come.

Jesus preached to His own and they rejected His message, then He sent His disciples out to the farthest parts of the region to proclaim the message there, and they would be better received.

After Pentecost, the Apostles would first preach in Jerusalem, then in Judea, but even though some came to faith, their own would by and large reject the message, and then it would be sent to far corners of the globe, where it would be better received.

After this time, there will be more contact with the authorities, more and more they will oppose Him, and the drama will increase as the time begins to grow shorter. But first, there will be news from Judea.

### ***John Has a Bad Day***

Mark 6:14-29

Parallel Texts: Matthew 14:1-12; Luke 9:7-9

The real "meat" in this text is found in verses 14-16, the part most commentators discuss and teach is in 17-29, unfortunately. Thomas Jefferson had a painting of John's head on the platter

hanging in his dining room, and I can attest that it is still there, yet the important part is not in what happened to John, it's what people were saying about Jesus at this point in His ministry.

*King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."*

*Others said, "He is Elijah."*

*And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."*

*But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"*

Mark 6:14-16

"King Herod had heard about this" "This?" What was "this?"

In context, this passage in Mark's gospel follows immediately the passage about Jesus sending out the twelve, it is relating to the Kingdom Tour, and we know that news and accounts of Jesus' activities had spread like wildfire throughout the region; the Pharisees had already begun to consider how they would kill Jesus, and they were exactly the ones who either knew, or with reasonable diligence they should have known that Jesus was the Messiah. Herod Antipas was another matter. Recall that he was the son of Herod the Great who had slaughtered the baby boys of Bethlehem upon hearing of the birth of Jesus. He was the Vassal-king of Judea, serving under the Roman Emperor, a marginal Jew at best in a secular administration, who one day would have his own problems with the Romans.

Who was this guy up in Galilee?

Nobody could figure that out for sure, but there were rumors.

Elijah? A prophet? No, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead!

It's clear that on some level, John had gotten to Herod. It's also clear that as a result of a stupid party stunt, Herod has randomly had John murdered. If you are Herod, and you are feeling guilty for what you did at that stupid party because you shot your mouth off... probably after a few drinks, and you think that John the Baptist has come back from the grave with miraculous powers, how do you feel about this new situation?

This guy is a rock star, the people are loving Him... and He has miraculous powers and you think he is the resurrection of the one you had murdered. What do you do now?

You could repent and beg forgiveness, but how would that look in the morning papers on the Emperor's desk the next day? (so to speak) How will that play on the nightly news? What will your approval numbers do with the people? (Remember, this guy was a politician in a tough spot)

Is there a way you could try to kill him again? But he doesn't stay dead!

What you really need are powerful allies, and sooner or later He is sure to catch wind of a plot against Him. I have a strong hunch that we might see Herod's fingerprints later in the story!

## ***Feeding the Crowds***

Mark 6:30-44

Parallel Texts: Matthew 14:13-21; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14

Mark jumps back to Jesus and the disciples, who have just returned after their journey through Galilee, giving us the impression that Herod's musings about who Jesus was had gone on during the mission of the twelve disciples. Jesus hears their stories and suggests they withdraw to the other shore of the Sea of Galilee, to a place Luke identifies as Bethsaida. Mark has them heading there later that night, but either way, they've crossed the border. It strikes me as interesting that Mark has the story of Herod and John the Baptist inserted here, because as soon as the "away team" returns to Jesus, He leads them out of Herod's jurisdiction...

Of course, the crowds have anticipated their destination and arrive first. That is also interesting; did Jesus have a staff leak? Maybe I was in politics too long, but I can't help wonder about that. Mark's reason for their withdrawal was that the crowd was so big, they couldn't even get a bite to eat, then the crowd, on foot, gets all the way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee before they can row straight across. Jesus, never letting an opportunity get away from Him, begins to teach. The disciples, seeing that it's late in the day, ask Jesus to send the crowd off to get food, and what does Jesus do?

He tells the disciples to feed them. Of course the disciples object, citing the cost, and Jesus has them gather up what food they have and there are five loaves of bread and two fishes. You know the story, with five loaves of bread and two fishes they feed five thousand people and have more leftover than they started with.

So, let's take stock: Jesus teaches the Kingdom, heals the sick and lame, makes the blind see, chases out demons, forgives sins, raises the dead and now provides free meals? If you are a priest, a Pharisee or Herod, your political problems are getting worse!

## ***A Stroll on the Lake***

Mark 6:45-56

Parallel Texts: Matthew 14:22-36; John 6:15-21

After feeding the five thousand, a murmur went through the crowd: "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus knew they were about to seize Him and make Him king by force. (John 6:14-15) This is why the politicians, Herod, the Pharisees and priests, were so concerned about Him. They had two problems, first, they didn't want to be replaced by Jesus, and they couldn't have cared less if He was really the Messiah. Second, they had to be concerned about the Romans. Rome did not permit rebellion. They would allow a considerable amount of local autonomy and local rule, which as it turns out, was the secret to their success as an Empire. Rebellion, however, would be crushed with a brutality that had become well-known. Yes, these political types were in a tough spot.

Jesus sent the disciples across the lake in the boat and sent the crowds home; all things considered, that might have been another miracle. Then, He went off to pray alone. That He did

so is probably material enough for an entire lesson, for please take note: If Jesus had intended any sort of a Kingdom in this world, He could have had it right then and there.

During the night, another storm comes up out on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus knowing that the boys were struggling against the elements walked out on the Sea in their direction shortly before dawn.

One can hardly be surprised that they mistook Him for a ghost... or something... after all I haven't seen a guy walking across a lake in the midst of a storm, and if I did, would I think it was Jesus when I first saw him? Well, that might not be the first thought to pop into my mind, and I have heard of this; they hadn't. They cry out in fear, Jesus identifies Himself. According to John, Jesus calls Peter out to walk on the water, which he does until he thinks about what he is doing, and then begins to sink; Jesus rescues him. Mark, however, didn't mention this detail, and says Jesus climbed into the boat and the winds were still. Here's an interesting thought: Mark, who left Peter's incident out of the story, is thought by most scholars to have written his gospel under Peter's supervision: Hmmmm...

Matthew recounts something interesting when they reached the shore that Mark only hinted at. Mark says that their hearts had been hardened, but Matthew goes on to say that when they arrived at the shore, the disciples worshiped Jesus, saying that surely He is the Son of God. (Matt. 14:33). This is the first time they realize this, even though they should have understood it when He fed all those people, and from time-to-time, they would seem to forget it in the months ahead.

They reach the shore after sun up, and are immediately recognized, and the people begin to bring their sick and lame for healing, and many were healed as the Kingdom Tour resumes, and the Pharisees are on the attack...

## Chapter 7

### ***To Be Defiled***

Mark 7:1-23

Parallel Texts: Matthew 15:1-20; John 7:1

This is a great story... we could spend a week going over it piece by piece! A group of Pharisees have come up from Jerusalem and in our first glimpse of them they are looking for a fight. They approach Jesus complaining that His disciples are eating before they have gone through the proper hand washing ceremony... of all things. Jesus is having none of that:

*He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:*

*"These people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.  
They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are merely human rules.'*

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

Mark 7:6-8

It didn't take Jesus very long to come to the point; He calls them hypocrites in the first sentence! The point is that they, who are such great law-keepers, just ask them and they'll tell you, are pushing customs and traditions that aren't in the Law. First He quotes Isaiah 29:13 to set up His counter-charge, and then goes right to the point:

*And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."*

Mark 7:9-13

Here he quotes the commandment, and then reminds the nice Pharisees of their tradition. A man could set aside part of his property as a gift to God (Corban) and be relieved of his obligations to his elderly parents... and the Pharisees are perfectly fine with that, which of course defeats the purpose of the commandment. And here they were, trying to use one of these idiotic traditions to condemn His disciples! Well, now... we're making friends today aren't we?

*Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."*

Mark 7:15

It didn't make any difference whether His disciples did the traditional hand washing before eating their meal; what good is a ritual? The food would not make them unclean in any way, they would swallow it and nature would take its course. It's what comes out of a person that makes them unclean, for what comes out of us reveals the condition of our hearts. If a man

sees a beautiful woman, the sight of her does not make him a sex-crazed maniac... unless a sex-crazed manic was already inside of him. If a person performs all of the right rituals and ceremonies and goes through all of the perfect motions on Sunday morning... so what? Those will not cause anyone to love God and love their neighbor unless the love of God was already within their hearts.

Oh, sorry, did I make this about us instead of about those dastardly Pharisees?

Dear reader, all too often, *we are the Pharisees!*

So let's see, what do we have here? Not only was Jesus some kind of a revolutionary preaching this new kingdom of His, not only was He healing the sick and lame, making the blind see, chasing out demons, forgiving sins and even raising the dead, and not only did He give out free food to his fans, now He was attacking the status quo by which the elites kept everyone in line:

Here's another report back to Jerusalem that I wish we could read together!

Yep, those Pharisees were looking for a fight, and Jesus didn't disappoint them.

### ***Demons, Dogs and Foreign Scenes***

Mark 7:24-30

Parallel Text: Matthew 15:21-28

A quick reading of this text will tell us that Jesus heals someone's daughter, but quick readings don't always yield the whole story, for there are those times when we are better off slowing down just a bit; this is one of those times.

This is the first time that Jesus has entirely left the country, as we would say today, for He is in Lebanon. It would seem that He has withdrawn entirely from Galilee with His disciples after more than a year of frantic activity and ever-growing crowds. It is to be a time of rest, and can I say it? A vacation or "retreat" of sorts. Yet He has become famous, and even in this Gentile land, His presence will not be a secret for very long. Mark goes to great lengths here to make it clear that the woman who approaches Jesus for help is a Gentile. He tells us that she is a Syrian of Phoenician extraction, rather more personal information than is really necessary, but he does so because her being a Gentile is the point of the story.

She asks Jesus to help her daughter, for her daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit. Jesus responds to her plea with a strange remark:

*"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."*

Mark 7:27

So is He telling the woman that He can only help the girl if she's just eaten? No, I don't think so. The woman sure had a comeback...

*"Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*

Mark 7:28

It was not uncommon in those days for people to have dogs as pets and as workers in the fields. In those days, they didn't have a special aisle in the grocery stores for all of the various kinds of dog food, and so the dogs ate table scraps. After a meal was finished, they would feed the leftovers to the dogs. During the meals, the dogs would have to wait, but if crumbs fell from the table, the dogs would snatch them up. Jesus and the woman were using a metaphor.

Jesus is telling the woman that He has come to preach the Kingdom to the Jews (children) and the Gentiles would receive the message after the Jews have had the first opportunity for salvation, for this is what God had promised them. The woman, being a Gentile, would have to wait. This was one sharp lady who fully comprehended what Jesus was telling her, and expanded His metaphor to the dogs snapping up crumbs that fall from the table, as she entreats Him to help her child.

*Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."*

Mark 7:29

This Gentile woman demonstrated more faith and understanding than the religious leaders of the Jews ever did! As a result of her faith, she was able to snatch up a "crumb" from the table, and the demon was gone from her child... and the child wasn't even there.

An amazing story: Jesus demonstrated another aspect of the Kingdom He was preaching: The Good News would be preached first to the Jews and after a time, it would be taken with power and authority to the Gentiles, for all Nations would be blessed by the seed of Abraham, as God had promised so long before.

This also marks the beginning of a new phase in Jesus' ministry, for from here forward Jesus will be highlighting for the disciples, the marked contrast between the traditions of Jews as taught by the religious leaders, and the reality of the Kingdom of heaven in their midst. He did so in this scene by 1) talking with a Gentile woman (which a Pharisee would never do) and 2) by responding to her faith and healing her child, which a Pharisee would also never do. These contrasts will continue as Jesus' foreign tour moves on to its next stop...

## ***Hearing and Speaking***

Mark 7:31-37

Parallel Text: Matthew 15:29-31

After some days in the region of Tyre, Jesus and the disciples moved on in the direction of Sidon, crossing into modern-day Syria, making their way finally to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee where they were confronted by large crowds; many were healed. Mark tells the story of the healing of one man in particular, a man who was both deaf and nearly unable to speak.

Jesus took the man aside, away from the commotion, and began His work. In so many cases, just touching Jesus' garment brought about healing, in others, Jesus spoke and the job was complete, but in this case, the recipient of the healing was deaf, so Jesus made plain to the man what He was doing in other ways. First Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears, picture in your mind what this would look like. Then Jesus spit! Apparently, this was a sign for the man to stick

out his tongue, because Jesus was able to touch it. If you have the picture in your mind, Jesus has a finger from each hand in the guy's ears, and probably one or both thumbs on his tongue.

At this point, Jesus looks to heaven, sighs deeply and says in Aramaic, "Be opened" and the man can hear and speak; he is healed.

Let he who has an ear hear, let him who has a tongue praise God.

It would be a matter of conjecture for me to explain why Jesus sighed deeply or why He didn't just say "So ordered" when He was asked to heal this man, for the text itself does not say. It could be that Jesus thought of all of those who were deaf and mute who would not be healed that day. It might be that He took the effort to use His hands so that the man would be aware of exactly what was going on so that he would know that Jesus had done this... maybe.

Then Jesus once again goes the next step and asks the man not to tell anybody what happened. Of course, that people would see this man hearing and talking would make the question of what had happened inevitable, and it would be pretty much impossible for him not to say. Why did Jesus make this request?

Earlier in Mark, we were told that He wanted to keep the numbers in the crowd under control, but it was a little late for that now. The text doesn't tell us, so I don't know. Yet, I can offer an observation: Jesus had become a rock star at that point, but He wasn't like the rock stars we might think of. Jesus was our role model, or better put, Jesus IS our role model! He was not healing and restoring people to wholeness to get His picture in the papers, He was fulfilling God's will on earth.

What are we supposed to be doing? Aren't we supposed to be leading people to Jesus so they might be made whole again? Are we supposed to be self-promoting in the process, or are we called upon to be humble as He was humble?

If nothing else, I should think it's something to ponder.

## Chapter 8

### ***Feeding and Not Knowing***

Mark 8:1-13

Parallel Texts: Matthew 15:32-16:4

Once again, we are near the Sea of Galilee with Jesus, the disciples and a very large crowd of people. Apparently they have all been there for quite a while, because Jesus feels that the people need to be fed. As He says, some have come from a long distance and need nourishment before they head home. In this, He shows His compassion for these people who have come to hear His teaching, and yet as the disciples point out, there was simply not enough food for such a large crowd; there's four thousand people out there!

Have they forgotten that Jesus had no problem with five thousand?

As He did before, Jesus had the disciples gather up their supplies and directed it be distributed to the crowd, and when their provisions were passed, everyone had their fill and they had more leftovers than they had started with. After they had eaten, Jesus sent the people home, and He and the disciples crossed the Sea again. Note that Mark doesn't record any conversation between them at this point.

Later, Mark doesn't specify exactly when, Jesus is chatting with some Pharisees.

*The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it." Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.*

Mark 8:11-13

In John's account of Jesus feeding the five thousand in chapter six, those same people, on the very next day ask Him for a sign. here, in Mark's account of His feeding of the four thousand, the Pharisees ask Him for a sign. I'm reminded of a story; you've probably heard it too:

A man heard that a great flood was coming, so he went up to the roof of his house. As the waters began to rise, his neighbor comes along in a boat and tells the man to get in, but the man declines saying that he knows God will save him. A few hours later, with the waters several feet higher, someone else comes along in a boat, but the man gives the same reply. Still later, with the waters creeping up the roofline, a helicopter comes by with a lifeline to pull him aboard, but the man maintains his position that God will save him. Finally, with the floodwaters waist-high and standing at the very highest point of the roof, in desperation the man calls out: "Oh Lord, I have faith that you will save me, when will you deliver me?"

Suddenly, the man hears a loud and booming voice from above the clouds saying unto him, "Man I have sent you two boats and a helicopter already. What do you want from me!?"

After all of the miracles and miraculous signs that Jesus has provided, and after just having fed four thousand people miraculously, the Pharisees ask for a sign... as if one more would make any difference!

Gee whiz, this reminds me of another story; lucky you!

There's a scene in Herman Wouk's book *War and Remembrance* in which a group of men are sitting around a table in occupied Europe during the Second World War. These men have all seen and heard things, enough for them to understand what the Nazis are up to and they have been trying to get word out about the Holocaust, but nobody will listen to them. Why? Why won't anybody listen or look at the evidence? One of them utters what is possibly the most brilliant line I've ever read in modern literature: "They have the will to not know."

Did you catch that? It's very subtle... the will "to not know." It isn't that they don't understand, it isn't just that they don't want to be bothered, it's that they want to remain ignorant. Jesus was there because God so loved the world that He was preparing to sacrifice His one and only Son, and Jesus was willing to be that sacrifice; He wanted all men to be saved by it. Thus, we must conclude that if one more sign would save these Pharisees, He would have given them a sign. He knew, however that they wanted to not know who He was, and as a result no amount of miracles would change anything for them because they didn't want it to. These Pharisees were not confused or unconvinced; they were working for the other side.

Jesus left them where they stood and got back into the boat.

What do you suppose God is showing us in this passage?

### ***Pharisees, Politicians and Yeast***

Mark 8:14-21

Parallel Text: Matthew 16:5-12

Remember the last post in which we saw the encounter Jesus had with some Pharisees; they demanded a sign and Jesus refused to give them one, and went back to the boat. In this passage, they are out in the boat when Jesus who, apparently out of the blue, tells them to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod. (Matthew recalls it as "Pharisees and Sadducees")

The disciples have no idea what He is talking about, and assume He is referring to the fact that they only had one loaf of bread. Jesus reminds them of the fact that He can make that one loaf into thousands if He wants to and seems incredulous at their lack of understanding. By now, you should see that there is a pattern here: Jesus has an entirely different point of view than everybody else. He isn't concerned about the merely physical, about the things of this world. The disciples, on the other hand, see things the way everybody else sees them; physical, practical, earthly, here and now. They don't understand where Jesus is coming from most of the time, and frankly who can blame them?

Don't most Christians think the same way the disciples were thinking?

"Of course Jesus is at the center of my life, yes I am following Him wherever He leads, absolutely I would do anything to help build His Kingdom... but right now I'm too busy." "Well, I don't think He means I should have to do *that!*"

No, they didn't understand what He was talking about.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was referring to the *teachings* of the Pharisees and Sadducees in 16:12.

The disciples might have stopped to think about what yeast represents in Scripture: SIN!

But Mark mentions Herod, was Herod a teacher? In a way he was, just like President Obama is in a sense a teacher. He was their political leader, and held great influence with many people, as does President Obama (or whoever might hold office). We have already seen how the Pharisees and Herod viewed Jesus as a threat to their positions, and the Sadducees would be right there with them... this guy needs to go away!

Think about the conversation Jesus has just had: After feeding the 4,000 by a miracle, the Pharisees wanted a sign. That demand was itself a sign, for it announced in a clear and unambiguous way that they were going to oppose Jesus and the Kingdom everywhere they encountered it. They would use their influence, along with that of Herod (strange bedfellows indeed) to stop Jesus at all costs. Beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod!

It's time to get a clue boys!

### ***Peter Gets it Right***

Mark 8:27-30

Parallel Texts: Matthew 16:13-20; Luke 9:18-21

After Jesus restores sight to a blind man in 8:22-26, Mark cuts to a new scene. Jesus and the disciples are walking toward Caesarea Philippi, and along the way Jesus asks them who people say that He is.' They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'" (v. 28) Then Jesus drops the big question:

*"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"*

*Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."*

Mark 8:29

Matthew has it this way:

*Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

Matthew 16:16

Some refer to this as "The Great Confession" for it is upon this confession that the church stands. As Matthew makes clear in 16:17-20, not only does the church stand upon this foundation, but also our hope of overcoming death itself rests here, for it is only through the belief that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of the Living God that that anyone will receive eternal life.

Sadly, there is much controversy on this passage, but I must remind myself that we are studying Mark, not Matthew! Suffice it say that the rock is the acknowledgement of the truth of Jesus' identity and not the poor vessel who first stated it, for in the very next section, Peter will demonstrate his lack of understanding of the totality of what he has said!

Mark finishes this part of the scene by simply stating that Jesus warned the disciples not to tell anyone about this. He does not give a reason for this warning. Maybe we should wait and see if anything will shed light on this as Mark continues.

You might be detecting a subtle shift in Mark's tone, for while his presentation remains choppy with short scenes moving quickly along, from this point, the tone of Mark's writing will become more and more serious. He has already begun to provide us with more details more often, and that trend will continue, and though he never provides the amount of in-depth coverage that Matthew and John will provide in parallel texts, Mark will be filling in more details from here on out than he has previously about certain things.

Well, Peter has attained a spiritual high in this text, being the first to say who Jesus is, let's see if he can stay on that high plane in the next section.

### ***Peter Gets it Wrong***

*He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*

*But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."*

Mark 8:31-33

Parallel Texts: Matthew 16:21-28; Luke 9:22-27

Let's get the timing right: Jesus asks the disciples who people say that He is, and they mention some of the buzz going around. Then He asks them who they say He is and Peter boldly announces that He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus asks them to keep that to themselves and then proceeds to tell them He must be rejected suffer and die... and that He will rise from the grave on the third day, whereupon Peter takes Him aside to *rebuke Him!*

That's right dear reader, only moments after acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of the living God, Peter is taking Him aside to straighten Him out! I can be pretty bold myself, but I've got nothing on old Peter!

"Get thee behind me Satan!" How many times have you heard someone repeat this famous line? Maybe you've used it yourself a time or two... as I have. Commentators write page after page about the finer points of meaning that they draw from this statement, preachers preach sermons on it...

That statement is not the point. Speculations about Satan are not the point. How many times do we quote His next remark? "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Merely human concerns; yep, the stuff we *always* think about. Jesus explains this further:

*Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to*

*save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."*

Mark 8:34-38

Most of the time, this is in a different sermon, but it is Jesus' reply to Peter telling Him He must allow Himself to be killed; it is the explanation of "Get thee behind me Satan," Jesus is on the earth for a reason, to accomplish a mission, to do His Father's bidding, not to live long and prosper; so are you and me. How much time we waste being concerned about our own comfort, how much time we waste being entertained! Is that all there is to life?

In our time, the idea of denying oneself is entirely foreign, counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. Do people make money selling books about self-denial? Do politicians get elected to office by promising that the government will stop handing out money and benefits?

No, not as a rule.

A person who loses his life for Christ and the gospel is a person who puts the interests of others ahead of his own. He or she is someone who serves God by serving others in a way that advances God's purpose; such a person finds life. A person who chases after the pleasures of this world loses their soul in the end, for they have not followed the example of Jesus Christ. Oh yes, maybe it's been quite the ride, but when it's over, it's over.

Ask yourself this question: Where would we be if Jesus had taken Peter's advice? Where would God's purpose have been if He had listened?

If you are concerned merely with human concerns, who will take the gospel to your neighbors, friends, coworkers... That's right, what will become of them? Will we act as though we are ashamed of Jesus in the face of opposition in this life? How will Jesus respond to that?

Hint: The answer is in our text!

## Chapter 9

### ***A Bright Future***

In the last part of Mark, "Peter Gets it Wrong." we saw some interesting things. We saw Peter get it wrong, after being so right on the money only a short time earlier. Remember how he was the first to state out loud who Jesus was: The Messiah, the Son of the living God? Then, as Jesus predicts His own death and resurrection, Peter takes Jesus aside to straighten Him out; no Lord, you mustn't die... and how Jesus rebukes Peter for his lack of understanding. And then, you might recall how Jesus taught that we must not be concerned with things that are merely of the earthly life, and with earthly views, but rather how we must learn to set all of that aside to follow Him. Yes, we saw many things!

There was one more thing that Jesus told them on that occasion, one more thing that would tie everything else together, a wonderful thing...

*And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."*

Mark 9:1

On the Kingdom Tour, Jesus has been teaching that the Kingdom was at hand, and all along the way, He has been doing and saying things that illustrate what the Kingdom would be like, and I have pointed those out to you as we've gone along the way. Things like how He was preaching righteousness, healing the sick and lame, driving out demons, forgiving sins, and even raising someone from the dead. The Kingdom would be like that, for it would remove the penalty for sin through forgiveness, and ultimately it would restore Mankind to the relationship with God that had been lost when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden. Those afflictions like sickness, blindness and the loss of limbs were consequences of that rebellion, as was oppression by evil spirits and even death itself.

It is one thing to say that this Kingdom was at hand, but it was quite another to say that some of you here will see its coming with power.

As we know, He told them the truth, for after His death and resurrection from the dead, the Kingdom came with power at Pentecost, and that Kingdom is here even now. But!! *That Kingdom is not of this world.* It is manifested on this earth in the church, which is supposed to be a place of healing, love and grace. Of course, we still get sick and die physically, for we are still in this world. Yet we must also remember that we are not of this world, for we are citizens of a heavenly Kingdom. We must not forget that just as Jesus rose bodily from the grave, so will we, for we have received the gift of eternal life and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Finally, we must also keep in mind that the day will come when everything of this world will come to an end.

As it worked out, most of the Jews rejected this whole thing, for they were looking for a different king and a different Kingdom. Amazingly, a great number of Christians today are making the same mistake, looking for an earthly Kingdom that is still to come: There is no earthly Kingdom to come, there is eternity to come.

So many arguments come from this, so many tangled interpretations in which the presupposition is more important than the Scriptures, robbing so many of the awesome

harmony of the Scriptures and creating so much confusion and discord. And the saddest thing of all? So many miss the amazing power of what we have within us right now.

When the Kingdom came with power on that Pentecost so long ago, the world we live in opposed it with everything they could muster. The religious authorities twisted and connived to discredit it, the culture opposed it economically and socially, the civil authorities banned it and persecuted it, demons attacked it, and in the background, Satan himself was pulling the strings... yet they were overcome by the power of weakness and meekness, and so the battle continues today. It is so very different from at first, and yet so very much the same, just as Scriptures predicted.

What will be the outcome of this conflict? Victory, glory and eternity with Christ!

### ***Transfiguration***

Mark 9:2-13

Parallel Texts: Matthew 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36

Six days go by, and then Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him up a nearby mountain. When they arrive, the three disciples are treated to an awesome and shocking sight; the transfiguration. Suddenly, Jesus is transformed to a heavenly state, His clothing shines brightly, and He is joined by Moses and Elijah; they are speaking together. The disciples are terrified, and who can blame them?

Peter blurts out that they should build three shrines, but suddenly they are joined by another presence, a presence within a descending cloud, and then a voice speaks:

“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (v. 7)

Think about that sight, these events so far...

Jesus, Moses and Elijah speaking together: Jesus, the Law and the Prophets speaking together. From the Jewish point of view, life is wrapped up in the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Then the voice of God tells them to listen to Jesus! The voice tells them that Jesus is the One He loves. Hold on a minute; what about the Law and the Prophets?

Poof! They are gone!

Jesus would shortly fulfill the Law and the Prophets; their day had come and would shortly be gone, leaving only Jesus.

Jesus asked them to keep this to themselves until He had risen from the dead, and they are confused about this rising from the dead part, because even now they are thinking from an earthly point of view,

*And they asked him, “Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”*

*Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.”*

## Mark 9:11-13

There are many theories on this text, and as usual, I will let others speculate on the fine points, while I simply point out the obvious ones. Why was it said that Elijah would come first? Because he would come first, and he had come first. The people so entirely misunderstood the prophecies concerning Elijah, that they killed him. Now they were with Messiah, and the people so completely misunderstood the prophecies about Jesus, that they would soon kill Him also. Many at the time believed that Elijah would return to restore all things, but they were being a bit too literal, for as we now know, the One who will restore all things is Jesus, who in fact has already done just that, having restored Man to God through the forgiveness of sins and with the gift of eternal life.

### ***Everything is Possible***

Mark 9:14-29

Parallel Texts: Matthew 17:14-20; Luke 9:37-43

When Jesus, Peter, James and John returned to the other disciples after the transfiguration, there was a dispute in progress; the teachers of the Law were arguing with the disciples. The people in the crowd see Jesus and come running to Him. "What are you arguing about" He asks, but before they could answer a man steps up and begs Jesus to help his son who was possessed by an impure spirit. Mark does not record for us what the argument was about.

The man goes into a fair amount of detail regarding his poor son's plight, and tells Jesus that His disciples on the scene were unable to drive the demon out of the boy, and asks Jesus to do it. Jesus' answer is puzzling:

*"You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."*

Mark 9:19

Mark doesn't elaborate on what Jesus was referring to here. When the spirit saw Jesus, it went wild within the boy.

*Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"*

*"From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."*

*"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes."*

*Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"*

Mark 9:21-24

The demon is going crazy in the boy, people are watching, nobody has answered his previous question, and yet Jesus seems as cool as a cucumber. That poor father tells Jesus of the horrors of the boy's life, can you imagine what that must have been like? Then the man says something perfectly reasonable, but Jesus doesn't seem to think so. "If you can do something." Nobody else had been able, but Jesus isn't just anybody else!

“If you can’t?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” Everything is possible? Really? Do you believe that? Why am I so often told so much about what can’t be done?

Well the man made a snap decision: He was going to believe; he even realized that he might need help moving forward, but he was going to start believing right then and there.

Jesus drove out the demon right then and there.

As I read this, I see that we have come face-to-face with one of those moments when we need to ask ourselves if we really believe that what we believe is really real.

Well, do we?

The disciples ask Jesus why they had been unable to drive this spirit out of the boy, and Jesus seems to give an almost nonchalant answer: “This kind can come out only by prayer.” What did Jesus mean by this remark?

The text doesn’t say.

I’ve read commentaries in which the author professes to know exactly what Jesus meant by that, and while confidence is all well and good, the truth is that we can only speculate and wonder.

### ***Teaching the Disciples***

Mark 9:30-50

Parallel Texts: Matthew 17:22-23; 18:1-14; Luke 9:43-50

Jesus and the disciples are on the road heading for home. As they walk along, Jesus tells them a second time that He must die and rise again. Of course, the disciples aren’t really sure what all of that means, so they don’t speak much, for this discussion scares them. Later on, they began to argue among themselves.

When they arrive, Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about. They don’t want to tell Him, because they had been arguing about which would be the greatest. As you might expect, they really didn’t need to tell Him; He already knew.

*Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”*

*He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”*

Mark 9:35-37

They were arguing about which would be the greatest, and Jesus tells them clearly that if you want to be great in the Kingdom, you must be the servant of all! Well, I can just imagine how this struck them; probably it struck them much the same way it strikes us. To be great I need to become a servant? This wouldn’t seem to reflect the way we normally think. Yet the Kingdom doesn’t operate the way the world does, does it? Whoever welcomes a little child, welcomes

Jesus, and if you welcome Jesus, you welcome His Father, for it would seem that God Himself isn't one to lord it over anyone.

Very revealing.

Another subject comes up: The disciples were irritated that someone else was driving out demons in Jesus' name; Jesus was cool with it. This person, whoever it was, was acting in Jesus' name, and if that is so, he isn't opposing Him: Anyone who isn't against Him is for Him. I hope that we can all spare a few moments to reflect on that statement, for it is profound indeed, especially in a Kingdom context.

Our passage ends with Jesus teaching the disciples about things that cause a person to stumble in their faith. It is important for us to recognize that Jesus is using hyperbole here; no He is not commanding that we disfigure or dismember ourselves. What He is teaching is a priority system of putting God first, putting His kingdom first, and always serving the Kingdom and our Lord in humility, lest we should fall away and come to a desperate situation. Anyone who causes another person to be thus damaged will regret their actions.

With that said, I hope we don't lose sight of the fact that amidst all of this hyperbole, there is a positive teaching, one of love and brotherhood, one of hope and eternal life. Purpose, always purpose, and not condemnation. We are the salt of the earth, and salt is a preservative. It is also a flavor enhancer, bringing out all of the flavors within a food, just as we can bring out all of the nuance and flavor of God in us in a world that is starving for light and goodness. Yet salt is a funny thing: Too little and everything is bland and unappealing. Too much can be lethal, but just right brings out the best of everything.

We might want to reflect on this, too.

## Chapter 10

### ***Jesus Teaches Many Things***

Mark 10:1-31

Parallel Texts: Matthew 19:1 - 20:16; Luke 18:15-30

Jesus has now left Galilee behind and crossed into Judea, and the crowds are large. In the first part of this passage, the Pharisees attempt to trap Him with a question about divorce. Surely they are aware of His teaching on the subject in the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus took a tough stand on the subject, saying that divorce is not permissible except for "unfaithfulness". Please recall that "unfaithfulness" is a covenant term, and not always a sexual term. Apparently, the Pharisees hoped to catch Jesus in a legal trap, since divorce was permitted under the Law of Moses, but as you might expect, they were no match for Him.

Then there is the incident of the little children being kept away from Jesus by His disciples, and Jesus' displeased reaction much as we have seen before. Then Jesus has a visit from a rich guy, a visit that brings the first two incidents into sharp focus.

It seems that this rich guy was quite a righteous man, and Jesus had an interesting reaction:

*Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."*

*At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

Mark 10:21-22

The man told Jesus that he had kept the commandments since he was a boy, and Jesus looked at him and loved him. I highly doubt that Jesus loved the man because the man had somehow "purchased" His love by keeping commandments; clearly the man had a good heart and desired to follow God. Yet in the end, he goes away sad, for he was very wealthy. Before we continue, I must point out that the text does not say that the man *didn't* do as Jesus asked, it only says that he was sad.

In verses 23-26, we see the reaction of the disciples to all of this, and Jesus' teaching on the subject. The disciples were surprised that it is difficult for the rich to enter the Kingdom, Jesus underscores the point with a little bit of hyperbole: "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." I can't tell you how many times I have heard people cite this and claim the rich are all going to hell, but that is foolish talk, and more about modern-day politics than Jesus' teaching... this is hyperbole to make a point: It's hard! The disciples ask how anyone can be saved, and Jesus gives the answer that sums up this section:

*Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."*

Mark 10:27

Neither you nor I can force our way into heaven, but with God we can get there. We are imperfect, we mess up, we stumble around and struggle with rule books and traditions and the things of this world, but God makes all things possible through Christ. This rich guy had a great deal of earthly wealth, and that is hard to walk away from, and the same is true today. If a person is homeless, with nothing to their name but the shirt on their back, they have nothing to lose in following Christ, but someone with a great deal...? They have a great deal to lose. Yet for each one of us, there is more in following Jesus than leaving money or wealth behind, for these are only physical things; we are called to leave *self* behind, and that is hard for any one of us to do, no matter what our balance sheet may say.

But with God, all things are possible!

*Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!"*

*"Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."*

Mark 10:28-31

The disciples had left their livelihoods and careers behind to follow Jesus, many will be called to do that, and others may need to leave their families behind, but all will receive much more both in this life and in eternity, and when we are willing to follow Jesus and leave all of the old ways behind, our God is ever-faithful to keep His promises. It is true that many will say we're crazy, for setting self aside for this is not the way of this world, but it is God's way; it is the line that separates those who are in Christ from those who refuse to follow Him.

### ***Are You Sure You Want That?***

Mark 10:32-45

Parallel Texts: Matthew 20:17-28; Luke 18:31-34

This interesting passage begins with Jesus predicting what his fate would be again, and then takes an odd shift when James and John ask for something they don't understand. In the end, Jesus sort of grants their wish and then tells them what they've chosen...

Can't you just picture the procession as they all marched towards Jerusalem? Jesus is in the lead, followed by the disciples, who in turn were followed by crowds of people. The disciples were astonished at where they were headed, while the people were afraid... but what did they fear? It would seem that the plotting of the Pharisees was not a well-kept secret.

At some point along the way, Jesus takes the disciples aside and tells them what is going to happen again; did they understand it this time?

This is where James and John enter the picture, asking Jesus to grant them a wish. They wanted to be seated at Jesus' right and left in the Kingdom. Apparently, they thought they were going into Jerusalem where Jesus would perform a miracle, kick the Romans out, put the

Pharisees in their place and move into the palace to be an earthly king, and they wanted the seats of honor for themselves.

I must conclude they didn't understand what Jesus was telling them.

Oh yes, of course they can drink the cup and have the baptism that Jesus would have, yeah, sign me up!

Well, they got a part of their wish, but not really the good part; they would be persecuted, abused and killed. But the seating arrangements were something else again. Now the other 10 are ticked off because James and John are trying to get the good seats ahead of the others, when Jesus explains how things will work in the Kingdom:

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

Mark 10:42b-45

Unlike an earthly, human kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven is not run by big shots. If you want to be honored in this Kingdom, you must be the slave of all! If you read the previous post, you will recall that it all came down to setting self aside for the sake of the gospel. Here, Jesus is teaching the same thing again, and do they get it this time?

I doubt it.

We might wonder how they could be so dense, how they could fail to see what Jesus was telling them, but let's not forget that they did not yet see how the story ends, and we have seen it, so it's only natural that we should have no problem seeing their mistake. That however, brings up another question: Why is it that most Christians don't comprehend what Jesus was teaching them?

Oh sure, we can all give the correct Sunday school answers, most of us can quote the verses... and we still want to be first, we still want to be recognized, honored and fussed over. We want to follow Jesus when it suits us, and to do our own thing when we want to... and we love to point fingers at others when they mess up.

So... we know the disciples got it eventually, so the question is more for our time than for theirs:

When will most of us finally get the picture?

***“Rabbi, I want to see.”***

Mark 10:46-52

Parallel Texts: Matthew 20:29-34; Luke 18:35-43

Jesus continues His journey to Jerusalem and reaches Jericho; it isn't far now to His destination. As they were leaving the city, followed by a large crowd, a blind beggar calls out to

Jesus and people rebuke him, telling him to be quiet, yet Jesus hears the man's cry. We aren't even into the story, but what an image!

Everyone around this poor fellow wanted him to shut up, but Jesus hears his cry and sends someone over to get him and bring him to Jesus. Does Jesus tell the man to be quiet? Certainly not; He asks the man what He can do for him.

“Rabbi, I want to see.”

*“Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.*

Mark 10:52

I wasn't with Mark when he wrote all of this, and I never had the opportunity to ask him why this story is stuck in this particular spot. Oh, sure, it was the next thing that happened; we can agree with that to a point, at least it's the next thing Mark decided to tell us about. Ah yes, sometimes a story is more powerful because of what isn't mentioned, and in this one, we have been in some pretty deep water in 10:1-45 haven't we? Then, the next section is the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Right in the middle, between Jesus' discussion of who is great in the Kingdom and His final entry into Jerusalem, the great climax of history, Mark drops this in: Why not mention something else, surely there were other incidents along the way?

Throughout the Kingdom Tour, Jesus has brought light into darkness; it's been right there for all to see. Now, as He and the others begin their steep climb into the mountains to a Jerusalem that is as dark as can be, they are bringing the light of Truth and God's Word along with them for all to see, and as Jesus and His entourage are walking past a blind man, the man shouts, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

And Jesus gives him sight so that he can see the Light of the World.

I don't know about you, dear reader, but I think this is one of those "wow" moments.

## Chapter 11

### ***Triumphal Entry***

Mark 11:1-11

Parallel Texts: Matthew 21:1-12, 14-17; Luke 19:29-44; John 12:12-19

As we have come to expect, Mark gives us the simple facts of the day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem as King and Messiah without fanfare or explanation of prophecies and Jewish traditions and expectations. In spite of this, anyone with some understanding of such things will recognize that the very manner of Jesus' entry into town was a statement of who He was and why He had come.

Verses 1-6 tell of the arrangements, Jesus sending a couple of disciples out to get the donkey for Him to ride into town, and everything being just as Jesus had told them, yet we shouldn't rush through this quite so fast. If you've been following along with this study, you will have noticed that Jesus, while He went around the countryside preaching the Kingdom, shied away from announcements of who He was, and often told the recipients of miracles to keep quiet about what had happened between them. Now by contrast, Jesus has a donkey to ride into town, and considering the fact that a donkey colt, never ridden, would be His method of transportation into the city, was exactly what had been prophesied for the entry of Messiah, (Zech. 9:9) Jesus was now "coming out."

It strikes most of us as odd that a King would ride into the city on a donkey, rather than on a mighty steed, and many have misunderstood this to be a show of humility, but that is a Western notion. For the Jew, horses were reserved for warfare and a king would ride a donkey in peacetime; they were highly prized in fact for they are more durable and reliable than a horse. Jesus was making a statement, there's no doubt about it, that He was King and Messiah.

When the colt was brought to Jesus, people took their cloaks and placed them on His mount for Him to sit upon, while others spread their cloaks out on the ground before Him, an honor reserved for a king. (2 Kings 9:13) Notice that Jesus no longer objected to this sort of thing. As Jesus began His procession into the city, people began to pour out to greet Him and others poured in with Him, there were shouts...

*"Hosanna!"*

*"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

*"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"*

*"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

Mark 11:9b-10

Mark has recorded an interesting combination of shouts here! "Hosanna" literally means "save" and the people used it in the sense of a praise. They recognized by their acclamation that Jesus had come in God's name, and then they tie this together as a sort of bridge between the past and future glory of Israel with the reference to Jesus as the son of David and rightful king. If you take a step back from the scene, tumultuous as it no doubt was, and reflect on the things Mark records here, there is an interesting picture:

Jesus came to Jerusalem to save the people, He was the Anointed One of God, coming in peace to God's city, and He was transforming the throne of David from an earthly to a heavenly one. In the end, that was exactly what would happen in one week's time.

Jesus travelled all the way to the Temple court, but when He arrived there, nobody from the Temple greeted Him. Mark mentions politely that it was late, but if the Chief Priest had been doing his job, the entire court would have rolled out the red carpet for the Messiah. Of course, they had other plans for God's Anointed One.

Jesus quietly returned to Bethany.

### ***Figs, Corruption and Prayers***

Mark 11:12-26

Parallel Texts: Matthew 21:18-19, 11-13, 20-22; Luke 19:45-48; 21:37-38

Few teachers teach this section from Mark's account, preferring instead to use the parallel in Matthew or Luke with their more confused timelines, but Mark's timeline is much more clear than the other two. As a teacher or commentator, you have a choice here: You can take individual events out of this narrative and discuss a great amount of detail regarding money exchange, buying and selling of sacrifices and use the fig tree to support your favorite end times theory, or you can keep them within Mark's context and see something wonderful. My approach for today is to leave these events within Mark's timeline and gaze at them in wonder and amazement.

Remember that after the Triumphal Entry, Jesus proceeded to the Temple court and, finding the area deserted, returned quietly to Bethany for the night. The next morning, He sets out once again for the city. On the way, He sees a fig tree and walks over to it hoping to find some figs to eat. Seeing none there, He curses the tree, saying "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." (v. 14)

He continued into town and went to the Temple courts. This time, He found them full of activity, mostly of the buying and selling variety, and He drove out the money changers, the vendors and all the rest saying, 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.' (v. 17)

Now, catch the next verse:

*The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.*

Mark 11:18

Mark has already told us that the Pharisees were plotting to kill Jesus, along with the allies of Herod; now the chief priest join the conspiracy... but notice *why*: "*because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.*"

Jesus walks into the Temple and shuts down the business operation and reminds the people that the Temple is supposed to be a house of prayer, and not a profit center... and the people

are *amazed!* It almost sounds like prayer at the Temple was a novel concept, which it probably was.

When evening came, Jesus returned to Bethany.

The next morning, as they went past the fig tree from the previous morning, the disciples notice that it has withered, and now *they* are amazed. Peter calls the tree to their attention, and Jesus sums up the point of this entire section: prayer, faith and forgiveness.

*“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”*

Mark 11:22b-25

Jesus responds to Peter by speaking of faith and prayer, you can almost say that He is really referring to our relationship with God here: Faith in Him, interaction with Him in prayer. He also mentions that when we interact with God, we need to forgive our brothers and sisters if they have wronged us in any way; sounds like love your neighbor, don't you think? Hmm... love God, love your neighbor: see the parallel?

Back to the beginning again: Jesus wishes for the fig tree to bear no more fruit, goes to town and chases the worldly business out of the Temple, which is God's dwelling place on earth and the center of the Jewish relationship with God, stating that it is a place of prayer (interaction/relationship) and the chief priests want Him killed for interrupting their business. The next day, the fig tree is dead, and Jesus teaches an object lesson on putting your relationship with God first and foremost in your life, which is the same thing He was teaching at the Temple.

What comes first in our lives, work, money, profit; the things of this world? That seems to be the view of the chief priests who had a great little business going in God's house. What are our churches all about, are our priorities the same as those of the chief priests? Could it be that this is the cause of a weak prayer life for us individually, and why many of our churches are not very effective for the cause of Christ?

Maybe, maybe not, but that was the lesson Jesus was teaching on that Monday and early Tuesday morning, and I hope we will reflect and pray on it.

### ***Jesus Under Attack***

After Jesus' discussion of the fig tree, He and the disciples enter the Temple courts and are observed by the priests and their entourage; the priests waste no time in challenging Him...

Mark 11:27-33

Parallel Texts: Matthew 21:23-27; Luke 20:1-8

The Chief Priest demands to know by what authority Jesus is saying and doing the things He's been up to, and I'm sure that His attack on their little Temple gold mine was foremost in their

minds. Jesus, a tough customer, isn't going to play their game, so He asks them a question of His own: By what authority did John the Baptist do what he did?

Pay close attention to verses 31-32 and look at their reasoning: Pure politics! They settled on "I don't know" in an attempt to dodge the question, so Jesus told them that He wouldn't answer them either. Notice in His wording that He fully recognized their dodge. The text tells us they feared the people who believed John, but they also must have known that John testified concerning the identity of Jesus; He really had them in a corner.

Then, remarkably, Jesus answers their question in a parable.

## Chapter 12

### ***Jesus Under Attack... continued***

Mark 12:1-12

Parallel Texts: Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46; Luke 20:9-19

The Chief Priest, the other priests, teachers, Pharisees and all the rest of them, knew exactly what Jesus was saying in the Parable of the Tenants; He was telling them the history of their people in a nutshell. Just as in Isaiah 5, the vineyard is Israel, they themselves are the tenants who beat and killed all of the servants God sent to them, yes, for those servants were the very prophets these guys talked about all the time. Now, God (the owner) has sent His Son to them, and they will kill Him too... and they will pay quite a price for their evil deeds.

Jesus finishes the parable off with a quote from Psalm 118 for good measure; they knew instantly who the "cornerstone" was... the stone the builders *rejected*. Jesus wasn't going to play their games, but He was most assuredly speaking their language, and they were not pleased. It's interesting don't you think, that nobody stopped to consider the likelihood that Jesus was telling them the truth and offering them a way out of their jam.

At this point, they retreated. Jesus has fought off the first attack, but there were more coming, after all, it wasn't even lunch time yet!

### ***Jesus Under Attack, the Second Wave***

Mark 12:13-17

Parallel Texts: Matthew 22:15-22; Luke 20:20-26

The second wave began later that same Tuesday. Jesus had already repulsed the attack of the Chief Priest, and this time, the Pharisees and their Herodian allies come at Him. As you recall, these two groups have been plotting to kill Jesus for some time now, and they have come to snare Him in a political trap.

*"Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"*

Mark 12:14b-15a

The phrasing of this question is amateurish to say the least. First of all, they butter Him up a bit too much with the complimentary preamble to the actual question by saying that he is a teacher of the truth who cannot be swayed by anybody; He always sticks to the truth. Then they ask if it is lawful to pay the tax to Caesar; this is the real question. This is a terribly unpopular tax among the Jews because it isn't honest, as we've covered before. It is also unpopular because it isn't a tax imposed under Jewish law, but by a foreign occupying power. If Jesus wants to remain popular with the crowds, He must say "no." However, if He does that, they will report Him to the Romans, and He will be taken away in chains and not heard from again. At this point, they make a tactical blunder when they ask the redundant question, "Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

Here's a debating tip for you, any time you are asked a question followed by a redundancy that pins you down to a yes or no answer, a trap has been set; beware.

Jesus of course, is several steps ahead of them, and asks to see a Roman coin, asks them who is pictured there and whose inscription is on the coin and has now turned the tables on His attackers.

*“Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”*

*“Caesar’s,” they replied.*

*Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”*

*And they were amazed at him.*

Mark 12:15c-17

Taking nothing away from Jesus' quick thinking, these Pharisees and Herodians should stick to plotting and leave the confrontations to competent professionals, for even though they had set a trap, it is about the poorest excuse for a trap ever recorded, rising to the level of a child. Jesus was out of their snare with a simple request and had them checkmated in a one-liner.

He also taught something very important in the process... this was Jesus after all... and that is that our priority must be on the things of God and not on the things of this earth.

Jesus isn't telling the people they should be thrilled to pay, nor is He making an endorsement of the Roman state; He is telling us to focus on God and the things of heaven.

At any rate, everyone was amazed at His answer, for once again Jesus' perspectives were so entirely in opposition to their own perspectives that they hadn't even considered that He might say what He did, for even then, following Jesus was entirely counter-intuitive, just as it is today.

When we get back together, the third wave of attack will burst upon the scene, this time led by the Sadducees.

### ***Jesus Under Attack: The Third Wave***

On that busy Tuesday, Jesus came under assault first by the chief Priest, then by the Pharisees, and now the third wave of attacks, this time from the Sadducees and then the teachers of the law. First, the Sadducees:

Mark 12:18-27

Parallel Texts: Matthew 22:23-33; Luke 20:27-39

The Sadducees don't believe in a resurrection, so their trap is designed to get Jesus to either side with them, or wander into some kind of legal mistake, and frankly they ask a better question than the Pharisees did earlier. The flaw in their logic is this: If a man has several wives during his lifetime, and then rises from the grave at the last day and has multiple wives in heaven, that is one thing, but for a woman to have had multiple husbands, as can happen without any

impropriety, as they demonstrate, the thought of a woman with multiple husbands is just too shocking... so it must prove that there is no resurrection.

As a note, the Pharisees were the ones who believed in a resurrection, and their rivals were the Sadducees. Actually, the Pharisees were about the only ones in authority who believed in a general resurrection in the Jewish community at the time; it isn't one of the promises of the Law as we have seen many times in previous posts. Could it be that the Sadducees secretly hoped to use Jesus' popularity against the Pharisees?

In verses 24-25, Jesus disarms their presupposition about marriage in heaven... their straw man, really... and then in the remaining verses, blows their no resurrection views out of the water by simply observing that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a God of the living and not a God of the dead; sorry boys.

The Sadducees retreat and the teachers of the law advance in attack:

Mark 12:28-34

Parallel Texts: Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 20:40

The teacher of the law who asked Jesus the next question had noticed that Jesus gave the Sadducees a good answer to their question, so he asked Jesus which of the commandments is most important, and it seems to me from Mark's account that the man was actually asking an honest question; not to trick or trap Jesus but to find out what He would say. Of course we all know the answer that Jesus gave in verses 29-31

*"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*

What happens next is really interesting. The teacher speaks to Jesus as though Jesus were a bright pupil and compliments Him on His answer, and goes on to teach Jesus in verses 32-33

*"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."*

Jesus told the man that he had answered wisely and that he wasn't far from the Kingdom of God, for the man had told Jesus that the two greatest commandments were more important than all of the sacrifices.

The tide begins to turn in this battle, and Jesus is poised to take the offensive when we get together next time and He has one more observation for His disciples that will just about put the day into context.

## ***Jesus Seizes the Initiative***

Mark 12:35-37

Parallel Texts: Matthew 22:41-46; Luke 20:41-44

On that fateful Tuesday, Jesus has fought off three waves of attack from Jewish authorities who each peppered Him with questions designed to entrap Him into a mistake they could use as a pretense to arrest and kill Him. Now, Jesus moves to counter-attack.

His opening salvo comes in the form of a question in verse 35: "Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David?"

To be fair, the teachers of the law were not wrong about the Messiah being the son of David in the sense that Messiah would clearly be of the House of David, the royal house of Israel, the house of kings. So, while they were technically correct as legalists usually are, they missed the larger point that Messiah would also be the Son of God, here on earth to establish an entirely new kind of kingdom; one that is not of this world at all.

*David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:*

*"The Lord said to my Lord:  
"Sit at my right hand  
until I put your enemies  
under your feet.""*

Mark 12:36; c.f. Psalm 110:1

Take careful notice, dear reader of this statement of Jesus, for many in our time seem to miss its ultimate significance. Jesus is making the point that David himself in the Psalm refers to this Messiah as "lord" and the son is not the lord over his father; it's the other way around under the Law (Honor your father and mother). Therefore, the Messiah is not merely of the clan of David, because He is also the Son of God, and being God's Son entirely supersedes the fact that He is of the House of David.

Here's an example of this relationship: Suppose the president had a son who was also a brigadier general. Everyone calls the son "general" and he receives the honor and respect of that rank. If a brigadier general walks up to the southwest gate of the White House, and his name is not on the guest list, he is turned away. If the son of the president walks up to the gate, he is always admitted because he is the president's son, for being the president's son supersedes his military rank when it comes to access to the president. So also does the fact that Jesus is the Son of God supersede His rank in the House of David.

Probably for all of the wrong reasons, the crowd was delighted.

Mark 12:38-40

Parallel Texts: Matthew 23:1-39; Luke 20:45-47

Jesus denounced the teachers of the law in this brief passage. His bill of particulars contains several charges:

They dress richly and expect to receive respect from the people.

They expect to get the best seats at public gatherings.

They "devour widows' houses."

They make long public prayers for show.

The other accounts add the Pharisees to this indictment, and Matthew records the seven woes here, while Mark as usual, is pithy. Consider what Jesus is accusing them of. Oh yes, He is calling them colossal hypocrites, but look at the priority system of these "righteous" and "religious" men. They want, more than anything else apparently, to be honored, respected and powerful. It is doubtful whether or not they care at all about their relationship with God, or about being faithful to Him; they are altogether worldly in their outlook in spite of their pious exteriors. They are using their lofty religious positions for personal advancement, and in the end they will rue the day they started down this path.

Let's not get too carried away throwing stones at the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, and let's also not get too carried away with looking for the Pharisees in our midst, even though there are many, for this passage is within a larger context. This larger context runs through the entire chapter, and the climax and application is in the last few verses, and we will look at the them tomorrow:

### **Very Good News!**

*Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.*

*Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."*

Mark 12:41-44

Parallel Text: Luke 21:1-4

Chapter 12 has been a chapter of battle with Jesus prevailing over three waves of attack. The battle takes the form of a verbal combat between two different value systems, but the more important reality about all of this is our discernment of the fact that the real fight wasn't a verbal one, but a spiritual one between two opposing powers.

In the last section, Mark 12:35-40, Jesus took the offensive against His real foe, and pronounced God's coming final judgment on the Enemy, and as I mentioned last time, Matthew really brings this divine judgment into focus in Matthew 23. Here in these few verses, we see the very same spiritual forces at work vying for the hearts of men and women, even though no one speaks. Jesus did not speak to any crowd, but spoke only privately as a Master speaks to His disciples.

Consider the parallels between the wealthy folks here, tossing large amounts of coinage into the pots, clanking loudly so that everyone can see their display of worldly position and success as they part with tiny fractions of their incomes in a demonstration of "piety", with the Pharisees,

Sadducees, priests and teachers of the law and their flowing fancy garments, arrogance and false demonstrations of "piety". Contrast all of this with the poor widow who gives everything she has to God.

To an onlooker, the situation of the "pious" well to do seems to show great favor from God, but it is only outward and worldly, thus it may not be of God at all, for He is not impressed by the outward grandeur of this world.

No! The poor widow is the one who has received God's favor! She isn't playing the world's game, and so she may be poor in worldly terms, but she is rich in faith, a faith that will see her through hard times and ensure her place in eternity while all of those who so value their worldly positions suffer the consequences for their foolish and selfish behavior.

This chapter was not written, in my view, to show us that Jesus was smarter than the other guys, nor was it written to show us that He was a better debater. It was written to instill in us the truth that Jesus came to establish a whole new kind of kingdom, one that is not of this world, one that is in opposition to this world. It was written so that we might understand that if we intend to follow Jesus, our attitudes must change, our priorities must change, and that in our daily lives this world needs to decrease and His Kingdom increase. In order for this to take place, we must let go of the notion that Jesus will someday return to establish a kingdom in and of this world, for His Kingdom is not, has never been and never will be of this world.

Yes, and this is very good news!

## Chapter 13

### ***The Temple, The City... The World***

Mark 13

Parallel Texts: Matthew 24-25; Luke 21:5-37

From the beginning of the book, Mark has taken us on the Kingdom Tour. He began with John's announcement that the Kingdom is at hand, and then proceeded with Jesus preaching the Kingdom throughout the countryside. As we have gone through this process, we've seen how Jesus demonstrated, by both word and deed, what the coming Kingdom of Heaven would be all about, and how once the Kingdom came, nothing would ever be the same again. We've also seen that the powers and authorities within the Jewish establishment opposed the Kingdom at every opportunity, along with demonic forces, creating a formidable alliance. Now, Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem for the final climax of His ministry. He has just completed an entire day of battle in the Temple Court and has pronounced God's judgment on the current corrupt system in the "seven woes" pronounced upon the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Matthew 23 and at the end of Mark 12.

Chapter 13 opens right after Jesus' judgments were pronounced, as He and the disciples were once again leaving the Temple area. They walked across the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple Mount, and the disciples ask Him a question along the way: 'As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"' (Verse 1) As you can clearly see, the subject is the Temple and magnificent buildings.

Jesus gave a curious reply: "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." In giving His response, Jesus specifically told them the Temple itself will be destroyed. The Temple being destroyed would have been a shocking thing to any Jew of that time, for the Temple is the center of Jewish life, culture and even of the Nation itself, for it is the dwelling place of God Himself on earth; the disciples were concerned. Privately some of the disciples ask: "'Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?'" (verse 4) Did you catch that? They want to know when the Temple will be destroyed and what the signs will be when the time is near for this to happen. In Matthew's account, they also ask what the signs of Jesus' coming will be, but that isn't asked here.

With all of this context set, the answer in verses 5-31 is the answer regarding the Temple, and not as some suggest, about the end of the world or the second coming. Verses 32 f.f. deal with the second coming, but we can only tell that by studying Matthew's account.

Since this is only a general overview based upon context, we might ask ourselves if this fits in with Mark's wider Kingdom context, and the answer to that is a strong and clear "Yes!" All along we've been seeing that everything was about to change entirely, but this change would not only be a theological or abstract change. The old Jewish kingdom was an earthly one, with earthly observances and physical manifestations, rules and observances. The new kingdom was to be a heavenly one that fulfills the illustrations and "types" of the old, bringing about an entirely new system, the New Covenant. You will recall that at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross, the

temple veil was torn in two. Remember also that this veil was the separation between Man and God, the separation that sealed off the Holy of holies, God's dwelling place within the Temple into which no one could enter, except the High Priest once a year, and then only after following the prescribed protocols. That was torn open for by the blood of Christ there was no longer a separation between Man and God... you could say that the Spirit of God moved to a new address at that time, and that His new address would be within the hearts of His followers, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, an act that made the old physical Temple obsolete.

When the Spirit came on Pentecost, this gospel was first preached to the Jews, and later to the whole world, and after a reasonable time, the Temple itself was destroyed removing all vestiges of the old system.

Yes, I would have to conclude that this story is entirely consistent with Mark's larger historical context, and central to Christian theology and understanding of our relationship with God in this age.

## Chapter 14

### ***Incident in Bethany***

Mark 14:1-11

Parallel Texts: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-16; Luke 22:1-6; John 12:2-8

This scene takes place on Tuesday night, Wednesday morning by the Jewish reckoning, in Jerusalem and Bethany. In Jerusalem, the Jewish authorities scheme and plot their knavish plans; they must kill Jesus at the earliest possible moment, but not during the festival. While they plot, Jesus reclines in Bethany, a short distance away, where a woman enters the house and anoints Him with a jar of very expensive perfume; the jar she used would have cost a year's wages for a working person; a *year's wages!*

The people in the room are shocked at the extravagance of this and they rebuke the woman harshly, after all that could have been sold and used to help the poor. If you think about it, it's difficult to disagree with those people, but Jesus told them to knock it off...

*"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."*

Mark 14:6-9

If you stop and think about what Jesus tells them here, you can't help but be struck by a few things. First off, Jesus implies that what this woman has done for Him is even more important than helping the poor, at least that it was of a higher immediate priority since He wasn't to be with them much longer. Then notice His little jab: "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want." (verse 7) Every time I read this, I wonder if any of those rebuking the woman would be willing to donate a whole year's wages to the poor if they were talking about using their own money, and not that of this woman... Maybe I shouldn't say this, but it almost strikes me the same way as when people advocate raising someone else's taxes for a poverty program.

Next, Jesus takes another step toward the cliff when He tells them that woman had done this to prepare His body beforehand for burial which He knew was now less than three days away. In verse 9 is a little prophecy: Where ever the gospel is preached, people will speak of the woman's actions... and considering that I'm posting about it now 2,000 years later from halfway around the globe, I guess He was right. The passage concludes with Judas slipping out to make his deal with the devil to betray Jesus to the authorities; the die is cast.

Remember the way chapter 12 ended? After a long day of attacks that Jesus rebuffed, and then after Jesus went on the offensive at the Temple Courts, Mark took us to the scene of the widow's offering, and Jesus told us about a whole new system where people would set aside the things and ways of this world to give God everything they have in His service. Then, the tumult of the Olivet Discourse in chapter 13, and now, well after sunset that night, this woman offers a sacrifice for Jesus, by pouring a whole year's wages over His head in the form of

expensive perfume. Another act of devotion, another act of self-sacrifice, another sacrifice of self, another glimpse of the Kingdom that was now standing at the door, ready to burst upon the earth.

Earlier that day, the reaction of the worldly leaders was to agree to kill Jesus. Now, one of His own disciples reacts by slipping away to make the final arrangements for His betrayal to those same leaders. Will this cycle ever end?

I don't know, but all these years later it still continues.

### ***The Last Supper***

Mark 14:12-26

Parallel Texts: Matthew 26:17-25; Luke 22:7-18, 21-23; John 13:22-26

Mark, as was his custom, approaches this subject with an economy of words, with verses 12-16 being about Jesus' instructions for preparations, followed by a brief description of their meal. As we might suspect, everything went just as Jesus said that they would. When the time came for the meal, Jesus tells the group that one of them will betray Him.

Naturally, they were shocked. "Surely you don't mean me Lord" seems to be the universal reaction to this, and Jesus narrows it down a bit in verses 19 and 20, and then in 21 He tells them that He will indeed allow Himself to be taken, as the Scriptures have foretold. All of this talk of betrayal, and Jesus' knowledge of who would do it and when, is there for a reason other than just to make a good story, for it documents that Jesus went willingly; a very important point. No one forced Jesus do anything that night, for He was there for the purpose of doing the Father's will, to accomplish the Father's purpose. That this would involve arrest, humiliation, torture, pain and death would not stop Him from going through with this purpose.

I wouldn't suggest that Jesus was looking forward to the experience, for He was human and faced the same physical weaknesses that the rest of us have. In fact, the added reality that He was also divine, with all of its power and authority most likely made His task more difficult, for it was necessary for Him to restrain His divine power and endure His human pain.

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."*

*Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it.*

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

*When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

Mark 14:22-26

It wouldn't appear that the disciples quite comprehended yet what Jesus had just done, let alone what He was talking about, but obviously the pieces would soon fall into place for them. For

each of us, we are fully aware of what has just happened in the story, for we commemorate it each Lord's Day in our worship. Maybe it is better here that I simply suggest that each of us pause in our busy day to reflect upon the significance of what Jesus was about to do for humanity in the hours that followed this dramatic scene, and to rededicate ourselves to His service.

### ***Final Hours Together***

Mark briefly describes the time Jesus spent with the disciples after their last meal together, quite a contrast with the several chapters John gave to the "Farewell Discourse." Mark breaks this into three short scenes:

#### *Jesus Predicts Peter's Denial*

Mark 14:27-31

Parallel Texts: Matthew 26:31-35; Luke 22:31-38; John 13:21-38

Peter's determination to remain loyal to Jesus is admirable, but sadly, it was not to be... at least not yet. Jesus knew that, but He also knew that Peter would fail, and along with the rest of them he would cut and run when things got too tough. He cited the prophecy from Zech. 13:7, and if your mind works as mine does, this citation begs an oddball question: Did Peter fail because of the prophecy, or was the prophecy made in the first place because God knew Peter (and the others) would fail? I struggled with this for a long time before I stumbled across the obvious and simple answer to the riddle. Peter and the others fell short because they were relying on their own strength and will not to fall short, therefore they fell short because their reliance was ill placed. Later, as Apostles, none of them fell short when the going was tough, really tough, for their reliance was upon God and they were sustained by His strength and not merely by their own.

#### *Praying in the Garden*

Mark 14:32-42

Parallel Texts: Matthew 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46; John 18:1

The scene in the Garden of Gethsemane is a poignant one, where Jesus prays fervently, filled with angst that the cup should pass from Him if possible, yet the Father's will and not His own should be done. Clearly, His human side wanted to find a way out of what He was about to endure, and yet His love for the Father and for humanity was stronger; His devotion to God's eternal purpose won out. Yet while this gut-wrenching scene is playing out, the disciples fall asleep!

I seriously doubt they fell asleep on purpose, but here too, they relied on their own strength and not upon God as they would later. The outcome of this ill-placed confidence is always the same, and we should really remember that.

#### *Jesus is Arrested*

Mark 14:43-52

Parallel Texts: Matthew 26:47-56; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:2-11

On come the goons from the temple guards, with Judas in the vanguard. Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss.

Of course we know this as one of history's great ironies; Jesus commented on it in the other accounts. I get the same chill seeing people today who loudly profess their love and devotion for Jesus, and then watch them do everything in their power to run people away from His church. ... but then that's just me. Did Judas really think he was doing Jesus a favor, forcing His hand so that He would raise an army and take the city by force as some have suggested over the years?

I have no idea what Judas was really thinking; maybe he just needed the money, or maybe he was under demonic influence, or maybe he was the only one who understood fully what Jesus was there to do and wanted to help out... I can't imagine! What I do know is that the stage was now set for the pivotal drama of all recorded history.

Of course, the disciples fled, and it would appear that there were more present than just the disciples, for in the final verse we see a young man, little more than a boy, who is swept up in the confusion, and who escapes the guards by slipping out of his garment and running off into the darkness naked: Meet our author everyone, for I am convinced that this was none other than Mark himself.

### ***Looking for an Excuse***

There's an old saying about excuses. OK, well maybe it isn't all that old, but it's a pretty good one, at least I think it is a good one. True it isn't famous or anything... fine, you got me, but it is what I say about excuses:

When you're looking for an excuse, one is as good as another.

That night, the Jewish authorities were looking for an excuse to kill Jesus, and they really weren't all too choosy about their excuse as long as everyone could keep the story straight; after all this guy was pretty popular.

Mark 14:53-65

Parallel Texts: Matthew 26:57-68; Luke 22:54, 63-65; John 23:24

Jesus on trial before the full cast of Jewish authorities: Can you imagine anything more ridiculous? The Son of God actually on trial before a group of corrupt hypocrites cowering behind their fancy robes, their meaningless earthly positions, desperate to maintain the magnificent fiction of their own self-righteousness, and all this for what reason? So they can truthfully preserve a lie; so they can lawfully continue their corruption; so they can graciously continue in their oppression.

E.G. Marshall once said that "truth is stranger than fiction... especially if you change it to make a good story". No changes are necessary for this story; it is just strange.

The biggest problem these clowns have is that their fake witnesses keep contradicting one another. Evidently, the witnesses for the prosecution weren't very well prepared to give testimony; at least they seemed to be forgetting their lines. Maybe they had a few drinks

beforehand and kept going off script, who knows? In any event, they were screwing up the phony trial. Jesus wasn't helping them; He kept declining comment. There's an old saying in politics: "When your opponent is self-destructing, get out of his way." Jesus was staying out-of-the-way in this fiasco, until...

The high priest finally asks Jesus directly the critical question: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

"I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

That did it, that's what the high priest wanted to hear: blasphemy!

Jesus has assumed onto himself the rights or attributes of God in His reply, and under the Law, He must die for His crime... unless it had been a truthful answer. Because this was a high tribunal of the religious leaders, all of whom were genuinely interested in finding the Truth in holiness and all righteousness and propriety, did the high priest examine any facts that might substantiate Jesus' claim?

Certainly not; he was only seeking an excuse to kill! Jesus was condemned immediately, spat upon and taken away and beaten.

Meanwhile, Peter, just outside in the courtyard, denied Jesus three times. (Mark 14:66-72)

The next morning, the Jewish religious leaders, those great paragons of God's Law and the supremacy of everything Jewish, take Jesus to the unclean Gentile dogs and beseech them to murder an innocent man, sent by God to deliver them as the irony continues in our next post...

## Chapter 15

### ***Roman "Justice" on Display***

Mark 15:1-20

Parallel Texts: Matthew 27:11-30; Luke 23:2-25; John 18:28-19:16

As usual, Mark is pithy, and a more complete version is available in the other accounts. The main thing that Mark conveys about this whole situation of Jesus before Pilate might just be the quality of the decision made by Pilate. In the other accounts, particularly in John's, we can easily see that Pilate struggled with this issue, that he really didn't want to have Jesus executed. While Mark certainly doesn't dispute this, his brief account, his 'just the facts' version renders a clear picture of the bottom line: Pilate in the end, was concerned with his political best interests, and that meant sending a man he knew to be innocent to a terrible death.

There is an old word that describes the actions of Jesus' accusers and judges, both Jewish and Gentile, that applies perfectly to this story, even though nobody uses it any more, that word is *perfidy*. Perfidy means treachery, untrustworthy and duplicitous, and that is exactly what has gone on here. The Pharisees, teachers of the law, high priest... and the Roman governor, all of them are guilty of perfidy. The question is why, and the soldiers give us the answer in their mocking of Jesus.

Read carefully verses 16-20.

At first glance, you might see a bored group of men in a very undesirable foreign post having a bit of rather sick and twisted sport with a condemned man. This man in their custody has obviously done something pretty bad; how often do the Jews and the Romans agree on anything? So here he is condemned to die... why not mess with him, he's not a Roman, so they can do pretty much whatever they want as long as he doesn't die just yet.

So they mock him; "king of the Jews," eh? Let's have some fun...

They make him a crown of thorns and jam it on his head; that's pretty funny. They find a purple robe, so they dress him up like a king with his new crown and beat him some more. Jesus must have made a hilarious sight for them, beaten, flogged, blood all over, blood running down his face dressed like some king!

King of the Jews! Hilarious! They had no use for the Jews, they hated even being there, they wanted a posting somewhere civilized... they kneel before their "king" and have another laugh...

An officer tells them to quit fooling around and march the prisoner off to his execution... they hated this part.

That's what you might see if you don't read these verses with a more discerning eye, but look again.

This is done to Jesus every day, sometimes we even join in cursing His name, participating in jokes with others. The comments made by those who are ignorant of who and what Jesus is, the insults against His followers, the jabs at His word, the little cartoons and pictures with clever slogans on them that you see most days right here on WordPress that denigrate and demean Jesus. The people who do these things today are just as ignorant as those Roman soldiers were, and they are doing exactly the same thing, for all of them are acting in open and gross rebellion against Almighty God whether they comprehend it or not, just as the accusers and judges of Jesus were.

Solomon wrote that there is nothing new under the sun. He was right then, and nothing has changed now.

There has been perfidy on a grand scale; politics has won out over righteousness. There has been beating and torture, there has been open mocking of God, and Jesus is led to His death. I'm sure the Sanhedrin was feeling relieved; in a short time this threat will be silenced once and for all and they can enjoy the holiday...

### ***The Moment They've Been Waiting For!***

Mark 15:24-32

Parallel Texts: Matthew 27:31-44; Luke 23:26-43; John 19:17-27

All those sleepless nights, the opportunities missed, the embarrassments in public, the plots, the cabals, the treachery... all of it had come to fruition for the loving and righteous men of Israel, for today, at this time, at this hour... RIGHT NOW! Jesus of Nazareth is being executed! Finally they had gotten what they wanted...

Mark's account of the crucifixion is of course brief. Yet, even in his pithiness, Mark includes one little detail that should jolt us out of the haze we might feel at reading a text that is so familiar to us. "Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" (vv. 29-30)

Such impatience! Jesus was destroying the temple by being on the cross, if you want to see it raised again, you need to wait a couple of days! Of course, they were clueless about these words.

Even the other two being crucified hurl insults at Him, and of course the Jewish leaders have some choice comments to make, showing just how classy they really are. The powers and authorities of this world were having a field-day, thoroughly enjoying their triumph over God.

Then, something wonderful happens...

Mark 15:33-41

Parallel Texts: Matthew 27:45-56; Luke 23:44-49; John 19:28-30

Jesus suddenly cries out, quoting Psalm 22:1, people get excited, maybe Elijah will come... wouldn't that be something to see? Elijah does not come, and shortly thereafter Jesus dies.

Had God forsaken Him at that moment? Theologians argue about that, but I think that He did, for Jesus had become sin on that cross. No, Jesus didn't sin, but He became sin for us. Isn't it something... Jesus had become the sin of those who had placed Him on that cross, and for their very insults they were hurling at that moment.

Then Jesus died.

The curtain in the temple was torn in two; the Old Covenant had seen its final sacrifice and passed into history as the temple of Jesus' body died; history itself had reached its climax.

Matthew tells us about an earthquake and clouds that darkened the sun, things that usually signify God's judgment. A Roman centurion has a surprising remark, and the opponents of Jesus head for their homes feeling... what? Relief probably. Sorrow was the dominant emotion of those women who remained there, His last followers. They would see to the arraignments.

The story, however, had only just begun.

## Chapter 16

### ***The Kingdom Comes***

Mark 16:1-8

Parallel Texts: Matthew 28:1-8; Luke 24:1-8, 12; John 20:1-10

When Jesus was born in that manger in Bethlehem nobody would have noticed, but God sent choruses of angels out to the fields and they were seen by the shepherds... and there was this star in the sky. When Jesus rose from the grave, there were no choirs to be seen, no great star lighting the sky, just chirping crickets and the sounds of the night.

Thus came the Kingdom.

John the Baptist prepared the way teaching the people that the Kingdom was at hand. Jesus preached the Kingdom far and wide and demonstrated its power as He went along, but when all of the work was finally completed, nobody knew about it at first. Shortly after sunrise on that fateful day at the very precipice of human history, a group of very faithful women arrive at the tomb to finish the dressing of the body, only to discover that there was no body for them to dress; He had risen!

I can't help but recall these two verses:

*Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!"*

Mark 15:29-30

Guess what boys? The temple was destroyed and He has risen it up again, just like He said, for as we know He was referring to the temple of His body. As for the physical temple building, now obsolete and useless? Well, the clock is ticking on its demise...

God wasn't quite ready for the big announcement just yet, or more to the point, Peter and the others who would be the ones announcing the arrival of the Kingdom weren't quite ready, but in 5 weeks, they would make a splash in Jerusalem.

In spite of the lack of fanfare, the day that Jesus rose from the grave was a glorious day, the most glorious of all days, but God's glory is not like Man's glory. There were no bands playing, no trumpets sounding, no parades or banners, no wall-to-wall coverage, no newspaper headlines and no ceremonies. Just an empty tomb and a messenger to tell the women that Jesus had risen: Low-key and reserved. John recalls that Mary saw Him, and thought He was the gardener. Obviously the artists have the scene wrong, no brightly shining white robes; a gardener to all appearances was He.

To this day, the world cannot handle this reality.

Why didn't God do something far more dramatic to get people's attention? He could have done that, since He was raising Jesus from the grave, a little fireworks would have been no big deal, and then He would have *proven* that Jesus returned from the dead. Just think of the sensation if

the risen Christ would have entered Jerusalem now; who would oppose Him? Why, He could have walked into Pilate's quarters and sent him and all of the Romans packing... He could have set up his Kingdom as an earthly one right then and there if that is what He intended, but He didn't. Don't forget that Jesus Himself had once remarked that even if someone died and rose again people wouldn't believe the message. Most people still don't.

God never wanted His followers to be robots; if He had wanted that, don't you think He could have made Adam a robot without free will in the first place... and saved Himself a lot of trouble?

He never wanted robots for followers; He wants people who are willing to choose to follow Him, and this tremendous level of restraint is one of the reasons He is worth following!

### ***A Few Final Thoughts on Mark***

I didn't want our tour through the gospel of Mark to end; I was having too much fun. But alas, there are only 16 chapters. You might have noticed that there are more verses in chapter 16 than I have actually covered, for I haven't posted on 16:9 ff.

I have decided to leave these alone, for I am really not so sure that they belong; they aren't included in the older manuscripts, and my best guess (and "guess" is all I have) is that they were added later to complete the story in light of the endings in the other three gospels. In this, they seem to me to accurately reflect the truth of Scripture and the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, but I doubt Mark put them there. With that said, let me reiterate that I could be mistaken on this point.

None of that takes away from the amazing impact of Mark's gospel. His pithy writing style leaves out a great deal of the detail surrounding the life and ministry of Jesus that is found in the other three, but in doing this, Mark's is also easier to follow for someone who isn't well versed in either the Old Testament or in theology generally, and that is a great contribution.

The Kingdom of Heaven is much discussed in Christian circles today. Did Jesus establish that kingdom when He was on the earth, or did something go wrong, and He'll try again when He returns? This is a question that persists to this day, particularly when we sit down together with our brothers and sisters with fundamentalist or evangelical perspective. Our answer to this question colors the way we perceive Scripture itself, and this has been true for several centuries now.

When I read Mark, I see a vibrant and dynamic Kingdom at work in Jesus' ministry, and I see it as having been established at His death, burial and resurrection. I see it continuing throughout the centuries that have elapsed since that time, sometimes more and sometimes less actively than others as the Kingdom ebbs and flows on this earth. I believe that God is willing and anxious for it to flow always, just as Jesus Himself was "flowing" all during His ministry, and yet God has given us free will, and we don't always use it wisely. I see the Adversary challenging Jesus during His ministry in various ways, not wishing to concede an inch of ground, and Jesus pushing him back when it suits Him to do so, and exercising restraint when it does not, and I see that going on for 2,000 years to date.

Yet I remain filled with hope and optimism going forward, for whatever God's timetable may be, whatever larger issues are going on "behind the scenes" I know how the story will ultimately

end, because Mark has set this out so well in his gospel. May each and every one of you retain the same optimistic view of both this life and the next as all of us move forward on our path to forever together as His Body!