

Grace Presbyterian Church Bible Studies

Mark

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

I. Who is Mark and why is his Gospel important?

A. **John Mark according to tradition is the author** and there is no good reason to doubt that. Mark was:

1. a cousin of Barnabas, a Levite (priestly class) whose name means “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36)
2. It was in his mother’s house that the believers were praying when Peter had been arrested (Acts 12:12).
3. He accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their early missionary journeys. However Paul later became disappointed with him and didn’t want him as a part of the team. This decision led to a break up between Paul and Barnabas (Acts .12:25; 13:5, 13; 15:37-38).
4. John Mark was later reunited with Paul and worked with Peter. Both expressed high praise for him (II Tim. 4:11; Phlmn. 1:24; I Peter 5:13).
5. John Mark may have been the young man who fled naked the night Jesus was arrested but there is no confirmation of this (Mark 14:51-52).

B. **What are some specific things and themes** to pay attention to as we read through Mark together?

1. “Gospel” means good news in the sense of proclaiming a victory. To say “the kingdom of God has come near” is to say that “God reigns!” (Isa. 52:7).
2. This gospel is written with a sense of urgency. The word “immediately” is used throughout beginning with the first chapter (Mark 1:13, 18, 20, 42).
3. The continuing response to Jesus in Mark’s Gospel is one of amazement and astonishment again beginning in the first chapter (Mark 1:22, 27).
4. The gospel is apparently written to a Gentile audience, probably in Rome around the time of Nero. Aramaic expressions need to be translated for them (5:41; 7:34; 14:36; 15:34). Jewish customs need to be explained (7:1-5, 11-13).
5. The key themes of the Gospel are different pictures of Jesus, all of which are introduced in the first chapter. Jesus is
 - a. the Son of God (1:1, 11)
 - b. one with great authority (“Son of Man,” cf. Daniel 7:13-14) 1:16-20, 22
 - c. a powerful healer and deliverer (1:7-8, 21-26, 32-34)
 - d. the gospel involves rejection and suffering (1:14). Later Jesus will be presented as the Suffering Servant who gives his life as a ransom – 10:45; 14:35-36; 15:37-39.

- e. a great teacher – 1:22, 27
- f. one who cares for the outcasts – 1:40-41
- g. one who can be easily misunderstood – 1:43-45. This fact is sometimes referred to as the “Messianic Secret,” i.e. Jesus commands people not to tell who he really is or what he’s done

II. Now let’s look at the events of chapter 1

1. title: “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1)
2. Announced by John the Baptist, a figure representing the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament – 1:2-8; II Kings 1:8
3. John introduces the themes of repentance and the forgiveness of sins – 1:4, 15
4. Jesus is baptized by John but does not confess any sin – 1:5, 9. In the power of God the Holy Spirit God the Father acknowledges Jesus as his Beloved Son -- 1:10-11
5. Jesus is tested by Satan in the wilderness – 1:12-13
6. Jesus begins his ministry and calls his first disciples – 1:14-20
7. Jesus teaches with authority and demonstrates his authority in casting out a demon in the synagogue (Satan is not only in the wilderness) – 1:21-28
8. Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law – 1:29-31
9. Jesus heals and cast out demons who know him (apparently others do not) – 1:32-34
10. Jesus prays and continues to proclaim his message. Again demons are mentioned. – 1:35-40
11. Jesus heals a leper (an outcast who under the Law should not even have come close to Jesus) – 1:40-42 (Lev. 13:45-46). Jesus probably responds with anger here rather than pity (1:41, see note).
12. Jesus commands the leper not to tell what has happened. The leper does not obey and Jesus’ ministry is hampered – 1:43-45

III. Questions for us

1. Mark’s Gospel is the beginning of a victory proclamation. How do we continue that proclamation? Do we experience “victory” in our lives? What would victory look like for us anyway (remembering this is never our victory but Christ’s alone)?
2. How is Jesus an urgent issue for us (“immediately”)? What does it mean to say that Jesus is urgent when so many other things keep pressing in on us (the tyranny of the urgent)? How does the urgency of Jesus’ call affect the other commitments in our lives (The disciples are called to leave their nets initially but

do they give up their livelihood of fishing? After the resurrection in John's Gospel Jesus helps them fish (John 21:1-6))?

3. How do we experience Jesus' authority in our lives? What does that authority represent in our personal lives, our work, our families, our communities, our world?
4. How do we experience his healing power? Jesus heals but there is nothing magical about asking him for healing (cf. II Cor. 12:1-10)? Do we believe that Jesus still heals today? Do we see his healing power around us? Are we looking for it?
5. How do we experience his power over the demonic? What does the demonic look like in our experience, in our world? Is the demonic just another name for evil? The demon in chapter 1 is in the synagogue during a worship service on the Sabbath. Does this mean that even the church isn't protected against demonic forces? What hope do we take from the fact that Jesus is always victorious over the demonic (or evil)?
6. Why do you think Jesus sternly warns the leper to say nothing about his healing (Mark 1:43-44)?
7. What are your thoughts, ideas or questions?

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“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

This is our second study in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark chapter 2 we encounter four specific incidents in which religious leaders question what Jesus is doing. In fact they do more than question. They are clearly critical. In their eyes Jesus is wrong. Not only is he not a **good example** he’s actually a **bad example**. Yet the bad religion of Jesus is our salvation. Let’s look now at these four events.

I. Jesus – the One who forgives sins

- a. Jesus returns to Capernaum where he presently lives – “at home” (cf. Matthew 3:13). – 2:1
- b. Jesus is proclaiming God’s word. The house (Peter and Andrew’s or his own) is full of people listening to the word.
- c. Four friends are trying to bring their friend to Jesus to be healed. It’s so crowded they can’t get through the door so they go up on the roof and remove part of it (!). They then lower their friend into the presence of Jesus.
- d. When Jesus sees their faith (not only the paralytic’s) he says to the sick man “Son, your sins are forgiven.” (2:4-5). Nothing states that this is why the friends were bringing their friend to Jesus.
- e. The religious leaders present accuse Jesus of “blasphemy” (2:7) since only God can forgive sins (Isa. 43:25; Daniel 9:9). Jesus never denies this.
- f. Jesus responds to their criticism with the statement “that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (2:10).
 1. “Son of Man” is a major title that Jesus uses in Mark’s Gospel (2:28; 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33-34, 45; 13:26; 14:21, 41,62). This is a challenging term and we must wrestle with its meaning as we go through Mark’s gospel..
 2. In the Book of Ezekiel the prophet is called “son of man.” In this context it seems to mean only one who is mortal or human (Ezekiel 3:1; 6:2; 13:1; 20:2).
 3. However in Daniel 7:13-14 (one of the few sections of Scripture written in Aramaic, the basic language of Jesus and the disciples) “Son of Man” is described as a heavenly figure to whom God gives dominion and power over all. When Jesus uses this term referring to himself at his trial before the high priest, the high priest responds with a cry of “blasphemy!” (14:61-63).
- g. The scene ends with Jesus’ physical healing of the paralytic. All were amazed (including his critics?). – 2:12

II. Jesus the One who eats with tax collectors and sinners

- a. Jesus calls Levi a tax collector – 2:13
- b. Jesus goes to eat at Levi's house with "many tax collectors and sinners" (bad enough only one or two?) – 2:15
- c. Again the religious leaders criticize Jesus for the "bad company" that he keeps (cf. Ps. 1:1)
- d. Jesus responds that those who are well do not need a physician – "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Ps. 5:12; Prov.3:33 but cf. Isa. 64:6).

III. Jesus does not fast

- a. Why don't your disciples (and you *presumably*) fast?
- b. Wedding imagery – the bridegroom – 2:18-19 (Matt. 25:1-13; John 2:1-11; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2)
- c. "and then they will fast on that day" – 2:20 – What is "that day?" – Good Friday?
- d. "new wine" – 2:22; Zech. 9:16-17; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13; John 2:1-11

IV. Plucking grain on the Sabbath – 2:23-27

- a. The disciples are picking grain on the Sabbath – 2:23
- b. The Pharisees say it is not lawful – but are they right? – What does the Bible actually say? - Ex. 20:8-11; Deut. 23:25
- c. Jesus gives an example from David – 2:25-26; I Sam. 21:1-6. But does this really fit? David's men were starving in war time. That's hardly the situation of the disciples.
- d. "The Son of Man is lord even over the Sabbath." – 2:27. There is a rabbinical basis for "The Sabbath is delivered unto you and you are not delivered to the Sabbath." Jesus clearly claims authority over the Sabbath and in effect the law – Matt. 5:17; Rom. 10:4 – Does Jesus' fulfillment set aside the law or at least the requirements of Sabbath observance? – Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:16; Heb. 8:13

V. Questions for us

1. How do we understand Jesus in this passage? The term "Son of Man" rather than suggesting his humanity seems to refer to his divinity (as in Daniel 7:13-14). He forgives sin without anyone asking for forgiveness. He is Lord of the Sabbath. What does this chapter tell us about the character of Jesus?

2. How is Jesus an example for us? What does it mean for us to eat with “tax collectors and sinners?” How, where and when do we do this? What are the positives and negatives of our following this example?
3. This is Ash Wednesday. How does what Jesus say relate to our understanding of fasting, especially fasting in a larger sense of things we “give up” for Lent?” There are very few passages in the New Testament where the apostles fast (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23). These are certainly positive examples. Yet there is no teaching or instruction for fasting in any of the New Testament epistles (they come into the church after the apostolic era). Is fasting still a practice for Christians today? Why or why not?
4. Is Jesus against religion? Why is it that the religious leaders of his day are so negative about him? What does that mean for us today?
5. How can we apply Jesus’ teaching about the Sabbath to our lives today?
6. What other thoughts and questions do you have?

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“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

Welcome to our third study in the Gospel of Mark. In chapter 3 we see Jesus both facing intense pressure and using great power. All of us face opposition and conflict in our lives. This chapter helps us understand the nature of that opposition and the enormous power which Christ gives to his disciples.

I. Continuing Conflict on the Sabbath – Mark 3:1-6

- a. Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath. Is this the same Sabbath as the previous scene of picking grain? We don't know but Mark presents it as a continuing theme.
- b. There is a man in the synagogue with a withered hand. Some commentators believe he may have been planted there by the Pharisees to set a trap for Jesus.
- c. The Pharisees' desire is to “accuse him” (Mark 3:2). Their issue would be that this healing does not have to be done on the Sabbath because the man with the withered hand is not in mortal danger. The healing could easily wait until the next day.
- d. Jesus again confronts them with their total misunderstanding. Not only is he the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27) but his rhetorical question of doing good or harm on the Sabbath makes it plain that it should be obvious that we should do good on the Sabbath (or any other day). The Sabbath is designed to remind us of God's goodness and deliverance (Deuteronomy 5:15).
- e. Jesus is angry and grieved at “their hardness of heart.” – Mark 3:5
- f. Jesus of course heals the man – Mark 3:5
- g. The Pharisees now conspire with the “Herodians,” probably a political group, “how to destroy him” – Mark 3:6

II. Jesus appoints the Twelve – 3:7-19

- a. Jesus continues to heal and many come to him. – Mark 3:7-10
- b. Only the demons know who he is (they call him “Son of God”) but he forbids them to tell (the Messianic Secret again)
- c. Jesus goes up the mountain to call the disciples. This suggests a parallel with Moses who went up Mount Sinai to be appointed by God. However it's not clear that a Roman audience would catch this allusion although from Paul's epistle it seems there were both Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome (although note a point from the first lesson that Mark seems to have to explain Jewish customs).
- d. Jesus gives the twelve three tasks
 - i. To be with him
 - ii. To sent out to proclaim the message
 - iii. To have authority to cast out demons

- e. The reference to Judas is interesting (Mark 3:19). Is this foreshadowing or did Mark presume that his audience already knew the basic story of Jesus' death and resurrection?

III. Who are Jesus' mother and brothers? - Mark 3:20-35

- a. Crowds still come to Jesus – Mark 3:20
- b. His family comes to restrain him because people say he is out of his mind (!) – Mark 3:21
- c. More seriously the Pharisees say that he is in league with the Devil. This is probably the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that is unpardonable (Mark 3:29).
- d. Since Jesus is casting out those in league with Satan how can he be under Satan's power since a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. This also fits in with his later statement that "those who are not against us are for us" (Mark 9:40).
- e. On the contrary a strong man (or kingdom) is not overcome by his allies but by an opponent who is stronger than he and able to tie him up and plunder his house (Mark 3:27). Many regard this as a parable of Jesus' work of defeating Satan (the "strong man"). Up to this point Jesus has cast out the demons who follow Satan (Mark 1:25-26, 34, 39, Mark 3:11). Now he is speaking of defeating Satan himself.

The Romans lived in a culture which celebrated heroes, "strong men," both mythical and historical. This would include Hercules, Achilles and Aeneas as well as Julius Caesar and his son, Caesar Augustus. The Romans could also hear in the reference to the strong man's kingdom an echo of Hades, the mythical god of the underworld. Heroes might on rare occasion visit the underworld and, even rarer, might rescue someone from there. However not even Zeus would claim to be able to "plunder" Hades' domain. In fact Zeus' intentions to rescue people from death is strongly opposed by the other gods. Such an action suggests an overturning of the basic order of the cosmos. It is important to understand this context to appreciate why people, and apparently even Jesus' own family, thought he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). Who could give authority to cast out demons? Who could possibly overpower Satan and plunder his house?

- f. "your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside" Those who belong to Jesus are never outside of him but with him. "Whoever does the will of God"
- Mark 3:34-35

IV. Questions for us

1. How does Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath relate to the practical living out of our faith in him? In what ways do we fall into the trap of setting rules without asking the larger question of how are we doing good or causing harm? For Jesus religion can be harmful. How do we keep that from happening?
2. Jesus is a very controversial figure in this passage. The Pharisees see him as a threat. His own family comes to restrain him because people think he's crazy.

Jesus looks at his critics with anger. How does this passage affect our view of Jesus?. Do these descriptions fit in with our picture of Jesus? Does our view of Jesus need to change? How?

3. Jesus in Mark's Gospel repeatedly reveals his power by overcoming the demonic. He will bind the "strong man," himself, Satan. Jesus calls the disciples to be with him, to proclaim his message and to have authority to cast out demons (Mark 3:14-15). Is this how we see ourselves? How are we being with Jesus today, proclaiming his message and casting out demons?
4. How do we see ourselves as part of Jesus' family? At times Jesus in Mark's Gospel speaks in very broad terms. His family are those who do the will of God? In this particular passage Jesus doesn't speak of faith, repentance or salvation. Why do you think that's so? Do you think we sometimes limit the definition of what it is to be a Christian? If so, what are some of the ways that we do that?
5. What are some of your thoughts and questions?

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“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

Welcome to our fourth study in the Gospel of Mark. In Chapter 4 Jesus expounds on the meaning of his call to discipleship. The disciples are “to be with him” and “to be sent out to proclaim his message” (Mark 3:14). In Chapter 5 we will see the “authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:15). In both parables and life experiences Jesus describes what it means to be with him and to proclaim his message. The descriptions given here apply to Jesus’ disciples through the ages.

I. The Parable of the Sower and the Seed – 4:1-20 **What does it mean “to be with him?”**

- a. Four kinds of response to the seed (Word of God) – “great crowd” (4:1)
 - i. Eaten by the birds on the path – 4:4
 - ii. Scorched on rocky ground – 4:5
 - iii. Choked by the thorns – 4:7
 - iv. Fell on good soil and yielded a great harvest – 4:8
- b. The smaller group – “those who were around him along with the twelve” – 4:10
 - i. “To you has been given the secret (mystery) of the kingdom of God”
4:11; Eph. 3:1-6; Matt. 11:27; Rom. 11:1-12
 - ii. “To those outside, everything comes in parables (riddles)”
4:11-12; Isa. 6:9-10; Matt. 13:10-15; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-41; Acts 28:26-27

This section underscores the fact that it is only through revelation that anyone knows Jesus or can respond to the Gospel (John 6:44-45). This is not to invite us to speculate as to who responds or who doesn’t, or how many will be saved (cf. Luke 13:22-30). It is only by God’s grace alone that anyone comes to Christ (Eph. 2:1-10). Jesus will not answer the question, “What about so-and-so?” John 21:21-22. We are to follow knowing salvation is only by grace through faith – Eph. 2:8-9 (“Where is the boasting? It is excluded” Rom. 3:27-28). It is enough for us to know that the first will be last and the last first (Mark 10:31).

- c. The meaning of the parable – 4:13-20 – Rather than four distinct groups these may well be four stages of discipleship, stages which Jesus himself had to go through. Often Scripture speaks of distinct groups constituting a sequences rather than separate categories. Paul illustrates this in his discussion of Jews

and Gentiles in Romans 9-11. Gentiles at present receive the Gospel while Jews mostly reject it. However the Jews who reject now will one day accept Christ and find salvation (Rom. 11:26). At the same time those who remain in one of the first three categories have no hope of salvation.

- i. Satan comes immediately to take away the word – 4:14; 8:27-33; 1:13
- ii. Those who receive with joy but have no root – 4:16-17; 10:23-26; 13:19-23
- iii. Cares and desires of the world choke the word – 4:18-19, 35-40; 8:14-21; 14:32-36
- iv. Those who not only “receive” the word but “welcome” it (“accept” in NRSV) – 4:20; 3:35 – becomes a huge group, cf. Rev. 7:9

II. The parables of the lamp and the seed – 4:21-34

- a. The lamp on the lampstand – nothing hidden except to be disclosed – 4:21-23. The Gospel reveals what humans seek to conceal. Luke 9:46-48; 16:14-15
- b. As they give they will also receive – 4:24; I Cor. 4:7; II Cor. 10:15
- c. More will be given to those who have and taken away from those who have nothing – 4:25; 19:11-26

As we give to the Lord we also receive. What we store up on earth comes to nothing (Matt. 6:19-21).

- d. The mustard seed – 4:26-34
 - i. The farmer does not know how the seed grows. Neither do we always know what impact our witness to the gospel has. 4:28
 - ii. The grain becomes more than ripe. It delivers itself up for the harvest. 4:29
The word translated “ripe” literally means “to hand, give over, deliver up.”
 - iii. The mustard seed appears very small but grows into a large tree. It is important to note that Jesus does not encourage the large crowds but focuses rather on the small group of disciples – 4:34. Even when there are many who claim to be his disciples they don’t necessarily remain with him. Yet even among those who do remain one of them is a “devil” - John 6:60-71.

III. Being with Jesus in the storm – 4:35-41

- a. The disciples are in “a great windstorm.” They are being overwhelmed with “the cares of the world” (4:19).

- b. Jesus sleeps through the storm. They wake him not to ask about his safety but about their own, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” The truth is they are not perishing. They are however very frightened.
- c. Jesus calms the storm. He then asks, “Have you still no faith?” – 4:39-40
- d. The disciples ask, “Who, then is this . . . ?” After all they have seen they don’t seem to know that Jesus is, in the words of the demons, “the Holy One of God” (1:24).

IV. Questions for us

- a. Can we recognize the four stages of response to the seed in our own lives? Do we repeat those stages (as the disciples seem to)? What is the difference between receiving the word (the first three stages) and accepting, literally welcoming, it? Does thinking of the four kinds of soil as a sequence encourage or discourage you in your Christian life? Why?
- b. What do you make of the fact that Jesus says to the disciples that to them has been given “the secret of the kingdom of God.” How do you account for the fact that they don’t understand (4:13) and at times seem to have “no faith” (4:40)?
- c. Have you experienced giving yourself over to the Lord and then receiving more than you gave (not necessarily in a material sense)? How would you describe that experience? On the other hand, do you feel like the sower who in rising night and day isn’t seeing any impact in your life and others? Can you recognize the growth of the seed even without knowing how that happens? What do you find helpful in the parable of the seed in 4:26-29? What do you find difficult?
- d. Are you ever discouraged by the small growth in your own spiritual life or in the lives of others or in the church in general? How would you apply the parable of the mustard seed to that situation? Why do you think we have so much difficulty perceiving long term effects of the Gospel both in our lives and in the lives of others?
- e. We have all felt like Jesus was sleeping through moments of crisis in our lives. What lessons can we take from the experience of the disciples in the storm? Does Jesus continue to surprise us as he did them? Why do you think this is?

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“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

Welcome to our fifth study in the Gospel of Mark. Chapter five presents several demonstrations of Jesus’ incredible power. Jesus the Victor is very much emphasized here. He overpowers demons, death and sickness. The focus here is on the tremendous healing which results from Jesus’ power. The reality of this power provides deliverance for people facing the most extreme conditions of suffering and turmoil. Jesus is not to be taken lightly. He is not to be laughed at (Mark 5:40). Through faith his victory becomes our victory.

I. The Healing of the Demon Possessed Man – Mark 5:1-20

- a. This takes place on the other side of the sea outside Palestine, east of Galilee. Jesus is away from home in a non-Jewish, Gentile town.
- b. Upon stepping outside the boat Jesus is “immediately” (the word occurs four times in this chapter) confronted by a demon possessed man who has been living “among the tombs”, in effect the graveyard.
- c. The man cannot be restrained, howling throughout the night and bruising himself with stones. No one has the strength to subdue him.
- d. The demons, unlike everyone else, recognize Jesus “from a distance.”
- e. The demons who are many call themselves Legion and have no doubt who Jesus is (see James 2:19). They recognize his full power over them.
- f. They plead not to be sent away. They ask to be sent into an immense herd of swine (swine were used in pagan sacrifices). Clearly we are not in Palestine.
- g. Jesus sends the demons into the swine who then rush into the sea and are drowned. The demons then are destroyed since they no longer inhabit any living being. Water is a symbol of life and therefore destroys the demonic (especially running or flowing water). Jesus speaks of “living water” (John 4:10-15). In an Old Testament apocryphal story Solomon threatens a demon with destruction by water. Think of the witch in *Wizard of Oz*.
- h. The demon possessed man is completely healed, “clothed and in his right mind” (Mark 5:15).
- i. The people of the town beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood (Mark 5:17).
- j. The healed man wants to follow Jesus but Jesus sends him back home to tell of the mercy he received (Mark 5:18-20).

II. Two Interconnected Healings – Mark 5:21-43

- a. The daughter of Jairus – Mark 5:21-24, 5:35-43
 1. Jesus is back home. Jairus, in contrast to the people of the Gerasenes begs Jesus to come to his home, his neighborhood (Mark 5:21-23)
 2. His little daughter is “at the point of death” (Mark 5:23)

- b. The woman with the hemorrhages - Mark 5:25-34
 1. After twelve years of medical care she was worse not better.
 2. She tries to touch Jesus secretly. She comes up behind him.
 3. She touches his cloak and immediately she is made well and immediately Jesus knows that power has gone out from him.
 4. Jesus asks, "Who touched my clothes?" The disciples, totally misunderstanding, say that lots of people are "touching" him.
 5. The woman reveals herself "in fear and trembling" (Mark 5:33).
 6. Jesus tells her that her faith has made her well and to go in peace (cf. Mark 2:5).

- c. Meanwhile the daughter of Jairus –
 1. While this is all going on word comes that the daughter is dead.
 2. Jesus' word to Jairus is "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5:36).
 3. Jesus takes only Peter, James and John with him.
 4. Jesus tells the mourners that the child is not dead but sleeping. They laugh at him (Mark 5:40).
 5. Jesus tells the little girl to get up. The Aramaic is translated for the Greek readers.
 6. Immediately the girl gets up.
 7. Jesus instructs them to feed her and tell no one what happened. Was this to allow him to leave without being overwhelmed by the crowd outside? The minute the people saw the girl alive wouldn't they know a miracle had happened? Contrast this response with that of the demon possessed man and his companions.

III. Questions for us

- a. How do we understand Jesus' power? Do we take seriously the fact that he defeats the demonic, cures the incurable and brings the dead back to life? Does this make a difference in how we look at the conflicts and challenges of life?
- b. How do we deal with the fact that demons (or the powers of evil) are still very active? There are people with incurable diseases who are not healed and dead who are not brought back to life. How do we understand Jesus' instruction, "Do not fear, only believe?" How do we apply this to Jesus' central message that the kingdom has come near (but is not fully present)?
- c. The demons recognize Jesus from a distance (5:6). What do you think this means?
- d. Why do you think the Gerasene people beg Jesus to leave?
- e. Why doesn't Jesus know who touched him? What does this say about his humanity?

- f. People in this chapter seem afraid of Jesus, try to hide from him or make fun of him. Why do you think this is? How do you see these same reactions going on today?
- g. How do we experience the power of Jesus in our daily lives?

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The sixth chapter of Mark focuses on the theme of discipleship. We first see the people in Jesus’ hometown rejecting him (Mark 6:1-6a). One would think they would be obvious disciples, knowing Jesus from childhood, but they are not. We then read of the first mission of the twelve (Mark 6:6b-13) and the death of Jesus’ first disciple, John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-29). The disciples are then given instructions to rest and later to feed the multitude who follow them (Mark 6:30-44). Their encounter with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee leaves them terrified (Mark 6:47-52). Their relationship with Jesus is still only in the beginning stages.

I. Jesus Comes to Nazareth – Mark 6:1-6a

- a. Jesus comes to Nazareth, his hometown, and teaches in the synagogue on the Sabbath.
- b. The people are “astounded” at him. They ask, literally, “Where did this guy get all this?”
- c. They know his family and yet are offended at him.
- d. “Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown.” Yet prophets in Scripture are often sent back to their hometown. Moses is sent back to Egypt, Isaiah is sent to his native city of Jerusalem and Paul is sent back to Tarsus.
- e. Jesus himself is amazed at their unbelief.
- f. The statement “he could do no deed of power” is ambiguous since he does heal some sick people and their unbelief could hardly prevent him from demonstrating his power. Mark could be saying he could do nothing they would find convincing.

II. The First Mission – Mark 6:6b-13

- a. Jesus sends out the disciples “two by two.” This suggests discipleship is not to be done by individuals. Later in Acts we read repeatedly of teams of two such as Peter and John and Paul and Barnabas. Individuals presumably would be far more vulnerable.
- b. They are to take no provisions with them. They are to depend on those who will receive them. This doesn’t deny their needs but the disciples are not to be concerned about them.
- c. They proclaim that all should repent. This is essentially the same message as John the Baptist (Mark 1:3) and Jesus (Mark 1:15).
- d. They cast out “many demons” and cure “many” who are sick. Again the theme of the demonic is emphasized in Mark (Mark 1:21-28; Mark 3:11,15; Mark 4:22-27; Mark 5:1-13).

III. The Death of John the Baptist – Mark 6:14-29

- a. This story is told in flashback. John is already dead. Herod, hearing of Jesus, is afraid that he is John come back to life.
- b. Herod did not desire John's death or even his imprisonment apparently. He arrested him on account of his wife, Herodias, who actually was "his brother Philip's wife," because John had confronted them with the immorality of their marriage. Herod even enjoyed listening to John (Mark 6:20).
- c. On his birthday which one commentator has literally called a stag party, Herodias' daughter danced before Herod and his guests (her mother according to the text was outside the hall). She so pleased Herod that he offered to give her whatever she wanted.
- d. Salome (her traditional name) "immediately" (the word is used four times in this chapter) goes out to ask her mother who tells her to demand Herod's head.
- e. In a grisly scene found in no other gospel Salome receives John's head on a platter and then goes and gives it to her mother.
- f. John's disciples come and bury his body.

IV. The Feeding of the Five Thousand – Mark 6:30-44

- a. Jesus and the disciples try to get away from the press of the crowds for a rest but the crowds follow them.
- b. It gets late and the disciples tell Jesus to "send them away." Jesus however tells them to feed the crowd. The disciples protest that this would cost too much (this is the first but not the last time this objection has been raised).
- c. Jesus asks what they have. They of course answer that they have five loaves and two fish.
- d. Jesus breaks the loaves and the fish after blessing them. The crowd is fed fully and there are twelve baskets of "broken pieces" left over. Some see these as symbolizing the twelve disciples.

V. On the Sea of Galilee – Mark 6:45-55

- a. Jesus sends the disciples ahead of him onto a boat to cross the sea.
- b. While on the boat the disciples are "straining at the oars against an adverse wind." In the early dawn Jesus appears to them walking on the water. Rather than being encouraged they are terrified. Yet Jesus tells them not to be afraid. They don't understand. Indeed their hearts are hardened. In this respect they are similar to the people in Nazareth.
- c. Jesus comes to the land of Gennesaret. Here the people welcome him and even those who touch the fringe of his cloak are healed.

VI. Questions for Us

- a. Why do you think the people of Jesus' hometown are so unresponsive to him? Is there a danger in knowing too much about Jesus without really knowing him?
- b. We see various pictures of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in this chapter. John is beheaded. The twelve are sent out with power but without material provisions. The disciples are also told to feed the multitude and are terrified when they see Jesus walking on the water. How do these examples help us understand our role as disciples today?
- c. Some see Herod in this chapter prefiguring Pilate. Herod, like Pilate, is being pressured to do something he really thinks is wrong in condemning an innocent man. What lessons does this situation have for us? Is there anything symbolic in the fact that the real enemy, Herodias, is outside the hall?
- d. What are the lessons to be learned in our own ministry in the fact that the disciples want to send the people away and Jesus wants to feed them?
- e. Do you think Jesus is amazed at our unbelief at times?
- f. How often do we find ourselves straining against an "adverse wind?" What do you make of the fact that the disciples are terrified of Jesus?

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

The seventh chapter of Mark’s gospel focuses on the incredible authority of Jesus Christ. Jesus here is revealed not only as a great teacher but as one who can actually redefine God’s Word. This chapter also sets up a strong contrast between the Jewish religious leaders who are critical of Jesus and Gentiles who readily submit to his authority.

I. Jesus’ Teaching on Food – Mark 7:1-23

- a. Jesus’ fame is sufficient that Pharisees and some scribes have come from Jerusalem to Gennesaret (Mark 6:53) to question him (Mark 7:1).
- b. These religious leaders observe that Jesus’ disciples were not ritually washing their hands before eating. Mark goes on to explain the Jewish practice for his Gentile audience (Mark 7:2-4).
- c. This was not a matter of Biblical authority but of “the tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:5).
- d. Jesus confronts their tradition with a quote from scripture, in this case from the Book of Isaiah (Mark 7:6; Isaiah 29:13). Jesus is quoting from the Greek version of the Old Testament. The Hebrew speaks of “a human commandment learned by rote.”
- e. Jesus goes further and criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for “making void the word of God through your tradition” (Mark 7:9-13). The New RSV follows the practice of the King James here in referring to scripture as “the word of God” as opposed to Jesus as the Word of God (John 1:1)
- f. Jesus continues his teaching first with the crowds and then with the disciples who still “fail to understand” (Mark 7:14-18). It is not what goes into us that defiles us but rather what comes out of us (Mark 7:15).
- g. Mark states that Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19). This has a double significance. First, it means that Jesus has the authority to reinterpret and even set aside the Law of Moses (cf. Matthew 5:21-48). Second, for Mark’s Gentile readers, it means that they are not accountable to the dietary restrictions in the Law.
- h. Jesus maintains that corruption comes from within not from without us, from the human heart (7:21-23). As Paul says, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected provided it is received with thanksgiving” (I Timothy 4:4) and “to the pure all things are pure” (Titus 1:15).

II. Jesus Among the Gentiles – Mark 7:24-37

- a. Jesus comes to Tyre. He doesn’t want to be known presumably so he can teach without interruption. Nonetheless people know he is there (Mark 7:24).

- b. A Gentile woman asks that her demon possessed daughter be healed. Jesus basically answers that his ministry is first to the “children” (Israel) and not the “dogs” (Gentiles). The woman responds that the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the children.
- c. Jesus acknowledges the woman’s faith (cf. Matthew 15:28). This is in contrast to the lack of faith on the part of the religious leaders.
- d. Jesus casts out the demon without even visiting the child (Mark 7:29-30).
- e. Jesus then cures a man who is deaf and mute (Mark 7:31-35).
- f. Once again Jesus tells them to say nothing but the people proclaim the event “zealously.”
- g. The Gentiles cry out that Jesus does everything well. This again is in contrast to the Jewish leaders who criticize him (Mark 7:36-37).
- h. Once again in this passage we have Mark’s themes of Jesus overpowering the demonic and the “Messianic Secret.”

III. Questions for Us

- a. The question of human tradition versus the word of God has persisted throughout the ages. What are examples for us today of our “making void the word of God” through our tradition?
- b. What do you think are the implications of Jesus setting aside a whole series of commandments in the Old Testament, in this case the dietary laws (Leviticus 11; Leviticus 17:10-16)? What does that mean for our understanding of the commandments in the Old Testament law?
- c. How would you apply Jesus’ statement, “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile?” This clearly cannot only refer to food since the things that defile “from within” include all kinds of sinful behavior and attitudes (Mark 7:21-23). What does Jesus’ statement imply about all the negative influences that are “outside a person” in today’s world?
- d. What do you make of Jesus’ exchange with the Gentile woman (Mark 7:24-30). Can you see how this passage has troubled people over the years? How would you respond to someone who says this passage makes Jesus seem harsh?
- e. What does Jesus’ total power over the demonic, a major theme in Mark, say to us regarding our fears about evil in the world?
- f. What would represent the contrast in our world today between the disbelieving religious leaders and the Gentiles who praise Jesus? What lessons can we learn from this contrast?

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

Two central themes emerge in the eighth chapter of Mark’s Gospel. The first is a continuing revelation of the power of Jesus now with the added theme of Jesus’ necessary death and resurrection. The second is the unpredictability of Jesus. Jesus is confusing to the Pharisees and to Peter. The disciples don’t understand him. He himself does not follow a set model but commands us to take up our cross and follow him.

I. The Importance of Bread and Yeast – Mark 8:1-21

- a. The feeding of the four thousand. Jesus performs another feeding miracle in Mark 1-10, this time with four thousand people. This account seems to have many similarities to the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6: 30-44. Some commentators believe they are simply two versions of the same story. On the other hand there seem to be some crucial differences. What do you think? Consider the following –
 - i. Parallels to the feeding of the five thousand – Is it the same story?
 1. Jesus has compassion on the hungry crowd – Mark 8:2; Mark 6:34
 2. both times the crowds are in a “deserted place” or a “desert” - Mark 6:31; Mark 8:4
 3. the disciples have no idea how to feed the crowd – Mark 8:4; Mark 6:37
 4. all they have are a few loaves and some fish – Mark 8:5,7; Mark 6:38
 5. Jesus blesses the food and everyone is fed – Mark 8:7-8; Mark 6:41-42
 6. There is a great deal left over – Mark 8:8; Mark 6:42
 - ii. Differences in the account
 1. This is a second time – “again” – Mark 8:1
 2. The second crowd has been three days without food, the first only a day.
 3. The first crowd was Jewish, the second were Gentiles (“the region of the Decapolis,” Mark 7:31; the presence of a large number of swine, Mark 5:13)
 4. Possible symbolism of the left over bread –
 - a. Five thousand – “twelve baskets” – twelve tribes of Israel?
 - b. Four thousand – “seven baskets” – seven, the number of perfection – the inclusion of the Gentiles in the perfect plan of salvation?
- b. The “yeast” of the Pharisees – The Pharisees once again come to test Jesus. Their testing takes the following form:
 - i. They ask Jesus for a “sign from heaven.” Consider that in the previous chapters Jesus has fed two multitudes with practically nothing, he has

- healed the sick, cast out demons and even brought a dead girl back to life. Yet they still want “a sign from heaven.”
- ii. Jesus sighs deeply in his spirit. He says no sign will be given “this generation” and he leaves them.
 - iii. Jesus is back with the disciples who have forgotten to bring any more than one loaf of bread (Mark 8:14). Jesus warns them of the “yeast” of the Pharisees and of Herod (Mark 8:15). “Yeast” here signifies a spreading corruption.
 - iv. The disciples completely misunderstand Jesus’ symbolism and think he is only speaking of their forgotten bread (Mark 8:16). Jesus reminds them of **both** the feeding of the four thousand and the five thousand. He in effect is saying, “How can you possibly be worrying about bread when you know I can feed thousands with only a small loaf?”

II. The Unpredictable Jesus

- a. The incomplete healing – Mark 8:22-26 - People bring a blind man to Jesus.
 - i. Jesus takes the man by the hand out of the village, puts saliva on his eyes and places his hands on him (as he did with deaf man in the previous chapter, Mark 7:31-35).
 - ii. Unlike that case and indeed all others this blind man is not “immediately” healed. His sight is only partially restored (Mark 8:24).
 - iii. Jesus lays his hands on the man a second time and then his sight is completely restored. This is the only time in the Gospels that Jesus has to touch a person twice for them to be healed. No explanation for this is given in the text.
- b. The confession at Caesarea Philippi – Mark 8:27-38
 - i. Jesus asks the disciples who do people say he is. The answers include
 1. John the Baptist risen from the dead. This is Herod’s view (Mark 6:16).
 2. Elijah, the prophetic forerunner of the Messiah (Malachi 4:5 which Martin Luther placed at the end of his Old Testament translation to prepare for the Gospels)
 3. “one of the prophets” – read, “other”
 - ii. Peter’s true confession and Satanic rebuke – Mark 8:29-33. When Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is Peter responds with the great confession, “You are the Messiah.” Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about him.
 - iii. Jesus then explains the meaning of his mission. He is to be rejected, killed and then rise again after three days (Note that Jews to this day define the beginning of a day as sunset not sunrise. Hence Jesus was in the tomb Friday (before sunset), Saturday (beginning sunset on Friday) and Sunday (beginning sunset on Saturday).
 - iv. Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him. This is a tactic one might take with a friend who has said or done something improper. It is completely inappropriate with the Son of God (Mark 1:11). It is perhaps not surprising that Jesus maintains his Messianic Secret (Mark 8:30). If

someone like Peter had this much trouble understanding, the crowds in general would be hopelessly confused.

- v. Jesus turns the tables on Peter, rebuking him, calling him Satan and saying that his mind is set on human things not divine things (is this what Satan does to us?).
- vi. Jesus calls both the crowds and the disciples to his mission. This mission is nothing less than standing with Jesus in a hostile society and taking up our cross and following him.
- vii. Jesus ends by reminding everyone including us that he will come again “in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). This is the final outcome in which we gain or lose our lives (Mark 8:36-37).

III. Questions for Us –

- a. Jesus in both his feedings of large crowds operates out of compassion for the people, Jews and Gentiles. The disciples’ reaction is to talk about how hard it is to carry out that compassion. How are we like the disciples when confronted with human need? How can we show the compassion of Jesus more?
- b. How often do we look at our loaves and fish, seeing inadequate resources for the challenges we face? It is easy to become concerned just like the disciples. How do we apply the truth to ourselves that Jesus can take the very little we have and turn it into overflowing abundance?
- c. What are examples of “yeast” in our lives and in our world? Does our generation still want signs in spite of all the testimony that Jesus has given through his word and through the Holy Spirit? What would you say to people who insist that they need to be actually shown that Jesus is the Son of God?
- d. Do we find it disturbing that the blind man in this passage is not immediately healed? What might that say to our experience with healing in this life? How important is it that Jesus finally heals the man completely?
- e. How do we, like Peter, both affirm Jesus and deny him? How do we both serve him and Satan? What lessons can we learn from Peter’s example?
- f. What does it mean for us to take up our cross and follow Jesus? What are some examples of this in our lives?

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

We have come to the midpoint of Mark’s Gospel. Mark seems very conscious of balancing his account with events from the first chapter (or opening since he didn’t write in chapters) along with foreshadowings of the conclusion. Jesus’ instruction is repeatedly addressed to the disciples who struggle greatly here to understand what is going on.

I. The Second Pronouncement of the Father – Mark 9:1-13

- a. Jesus announces that “there are some standing here that will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 9:1). In fulfillment of this prophecy he brings three of his disciples with him to a high mountain where he is transfigured. In this event we see a number of parallels to the opening of the Gospel.
 1. the kingdom of God is being revealed – Mark 1:15; Mark 9:1
 2. Jesus calls disciples to accompany him – Mark 1:17; Mark 9:2
 3. God the Father’s voice is heard proclaiming him as the Beloved Son – Mark 1:11; Mark 9:7
 4. Jesus gives instructions that no one be told about him – Mark 1:34, 44; Mark 9:9
- b. There are a number of distinctive features about the Transfiguration itself
 1. Only Jesus is transfigured. His dazzling white clothes point forward to the angel at the tomb at the resurrection – Mark 16:5
 2. Elijah and Moses are present with Jesus as witnesses not as equals. Moses foretold the coming of a prophet like himself (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). Elijah was to come again “before the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5).
 3. This entire scene is full of Old Testament parallels
 - a. Frequently in the Old Testament mountains have special significance. Moses encounters God at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:3). Ezekiel confronts the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18:19). Daniel has a vision of a “great mountain” (Daniel 2:35).
 - b. God often speaks from a cloud (Exodus 16:10; Exodus 19:9; Exodus 24:15-16; Exodus 33:1; Exodus 40:34-38; Numbers 9:15-22; I Kings 8:10-11; Isaiah 4:5).
 - c. Jesus’ reference to Elijah having come and “they did to him whatever they pleased” is a somber reference to the continuation of the story of Elijah in John the Baptist (Mark 9:11-13). In the Old Testament the evil queen Jezebel tries to kill Elijah and fails. Yet her New Testament counterpart, Herodias does succeed in killing John the Baptist (Mark 6:17-29). This

will be seen as another foreshadow of Jesus' own suffering in leading to the restoration of all things (Mark 9:12, 31).

4. Peter's mistake is in suggesting that Jesus can be put on an equal standing with the two great prophets. Only Jesus is God's Beloved Son. Peter is in effect going backwards to the prophets and not seeing the full reality of Jesus as the fulfillment of the law (Mark 9:5; II Peter 1:16-18).

II. Jesus casts out a fierce demon – Mark 9:14-29

- a. As in the first chapter there is a major casting out of a demon (Mark 1:21-27). This demon is especially fierce and the disciples cannot cast it out. The boy has been afflicted from childhood (Mark 9:21) and he can neither hear nor speak and is assaulted by the demon (Mark 9:17-18, 25).
- b. Jesus again expresses his frustration with the lack of faith on the part of the disciples (Mark 9:19). The disciples bring the demon possessed boy to Jesus (Mark 9:20).
- c. The father, understandably distraught, and faced with the failure of the disciples, asks Jesus to help if he is able (Mark 9:22).
- d. Jesus replies that "All things can be done for the one who believes" (Mark 9:23).
- e. The father in a famous response cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).
- f. Jesus in the act of exorcism restores the boy's hearing and speech. The boy appears to be dead. Jesus raises him up using the same verb that will describe his own rising from the dead (Mark 9:25-27).
- g. The disciples ask why they failed to cast out the demon. Jesus replies that "this kind," i.e. a severe form of evil, can only come out through prayer (the reference to fasting is apparently a later addition to the text). Jesus does not need to pray in this case. The disciples do (Mark 9:29).

III. The Continuing Struggle of the Disciples – Mark 9:30-49

- a. Jesus foretells his own death and resurrection. This has been implied through all the events of this chapter. The disciples continue to not understand and they are afraid to ask Jesus about it (Mark 9:30-32).
- b. Arriving in Capernaum Jesus confronts them with their arguing over who among them was the greatest (so much for following Jesus' instruction to focus on prayer!) Using the example of a child Jesus teaches them a much needed lesson in humility: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:33-37).
- c. The next exchange shows the disciples at their most clueless.
 - i. John (no less) tells Jesus how they tried to stop someone from casting out demons in Jesus' name "because he was not following us." The irony here is that they're trying to stop someone from doing the very thing they could not do. (Mark 9:38).

- ii. Jesus once again rebukes them (Mark 9:39). Jesus here seems to be speaking about those who do “a deed of power in my name.” This seems very broad as is the statement that anyone who gives them a cup of water because you bear the name of Christ “will by no means lose the reward.” Broader still is the statement, “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:38-41). This all suggests that those who belong to Christ include a number of those outside the company of the disciples. In John 10:16 Jesus speaks of having “other sheep.” Some regard this as Gentile believers but it may be broader than that (cf. Matthew 25:31-46).
- d. Following these broad statements Jesus gives a stern warning which arises from the possibility of being a stumbling block to “one of these little ones who believe in me” “Stumble” here really means “to make to sin” so one can appreciate the severity of the warning (Mark 9:42-48; Romans 14:13-21; II Corinthians 11:29).
- e. Jesus concludes this discourse speaking of salt. Salt both preserves and gives flavor. If it loses this flavor (or “saltiness”) it has no advantage. The image of fire has the sense of judgment or purging (Malachi 3:2; Matthew 3:11-12). Yet this will lead to peace. The idea here is that if we purge away the chaff or impurities in our lives we will be able to “be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:49-50).

Questions for us –

1. What do you think Mark is trying to communicate by having references both to the beginning and the ending of his Gospel at this midpoint in his narrative?
2. Peter consistently seems to want to go backwards in his faith (even to calling Jesus a Rabbi 9:5; Acts 10:1-16; Gal. 2:11-14). It’s as though he’s reverting to the faith of a child in an inappropriate way by going back to the Law. Why do you think this is? Is this a tendency we fall into as well?
3. What is the meaning of “I believe, help my unbelief?”
4. The disciples are unable to rebuke a demon so they rebuke someone who casts out demons in Jesus’ name. Huh!? They argue among themselves as to which of them is the greatest. They don’t understand Jesus’ repeated statements of his death and resurrection and they’re even afraid to ask him. Why do you think they have such great difficulty in making sense of Jesus and his message? What about us as disciples today?
5. What do you think Jesus means by saying, “Whoever is not against us is for us?”
6. What are examples of salt for us today? How can we have both fire and peace?

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

In chapter ten, Mark is already beginning the account of Jesus’ death on the cross. We have here both a detailed description of Jesus’ suffering and the purpose of his death. Jesus presents here some very difficult and even troubling teachings about discipleship. The real purpose of this is to strengthen our dependence upon Christ and thereby give us both assurance and hope. The key verse of the chapter I think is v. 27, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

I. The Question about Divorce – 10:1-12

- a. The Pharisees come “to test” Jesus by asking him about divorce. It is important to understand that this is not an honest question. John the Baptist had been killed because he confronted Herod with marrying his brother’s divorced wife (Mark 6:17-18). The Pharisees may be hoping to put Jesus in the same trap by in effect having him criticize Herod’s actions.
- b. The Pharisees refer to Moses’ provision for divorce (Deut. 24:1-2). Jesus answers that this was in response to the people’s “hardness of heart.”
- c. Jesus lays out his basic view of marriage and divorce:
 1. From creation marriage was designed for male and female to become “one flesh” (vv. 6-8; Gen. 1:27; 2:24; Mal. 2:13-16).
 2. Jesus states that if either husband or wife divorces their spouse and marries another, they commit adultery. This is obviously a difficult statement, especially in today’s world. However, it is clear to see even from experience that divorce is not God’s will. Mark does not discuss exceptions to this that are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament including unfaithfulness (Matt. 19:9) and desertion (I Cor. 7:15).
 3. The fact that the disciples ask Jesus about this again indicates that they are troubled by what sounds to them (and us) as a very demanding standard (Matt. 19:10).

II. Jesus blesses the children – 10:13-16

- a. People are bringing children to Jesus. The disciples, though, speak sternly to them. We are not told why they react this way. They may have seen the children simply as an annoyance or an intrusion.
- b. Jesus, however, is indignant not with the children or the people bringing them, but with the disciples and their closed-minded attitude.
- c. Jesus makes two important statements about the children. First, he says that the kingdom of God belongs to them. This must have sounded strange to the disciples since a child would have limited understanding of the scriptures and the nature of faith. Over against such an assumption, Jesus adds that anyone must receive the kingdom of God “as a little child.”
- d. This statement has great implications. What does it mean to receive the kingdom “as a little child?” First of all, a child is trusting. That is the nature

of faith. Second, there is much that a child does not understand. Third, a child knows that he or she is dependent on others. We need to show all these traits in our being dependent on God.

e. Jesus takes the children up in his arms and blesses them. This is no casual act. These children belong to him. The practice of infant baptism is based on the Old Testament idea of circumcision and this instance of Jesus blessing the children.

III. The Rich Young Man – 10:17-31

a. The rich young man asks Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus challenges him with the idea that only God is good. The young man misunderstands who Jesus is, so after this he will only call him “Teacher” (v. 20), missing the point, of course, that Jesus is good because he is God.

b. Jesus refers to the commandments which the young man proudly maintains he has kept since his youth. Clearly, his self perception is off since no one can keep the commandments. Jesus exposes his shallow understanding by confronting the young man with the nature of stewardship. He is to give all he has to the poor since all he has belongs to God. The real point is that he has to come to the place where he sees that he himself (like us) belongs to God totally.

c. Jesus loves this young man, but the man is understandably “shocked” by Jesus’ demand. He leaves grieving, choosing his possessions over Jesus. There are few passages in the Scriptures more tragic than verse 22.

d. Jesus talks about what an obstacle to God wealth is. The disciples have grown up with the idea that riches are a blessing from God. They certainly are (Deut. 28:1-14; Job 1:10; Prov. 10:22). However, riches cannot take the place of God. The Old Testament had also clearly warned of the dangers of riches (Deut. 8:13-14; Pss. 52:7; 62:10; Jer. 17:11). Jesus states that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. In other words, it is impossible.

e. The disciples really react to this. They are “greatly astounded.” They are no doubt thinking, “If someone as outstanding as the rich young man is not qualified for the kingdom, then who is?”

f. Jesus responds that for mortals, it is impossible. It is not impossible just for the rich. It is impossible for everyone because every one of us is a sinner. Yet “for God all things are possible.”

g. Peter realizes that he and the disciples, while not being wealthy, have still left all to follow Jesus. Jesus states that whatever we have lost for his sake will be more than compensated both here and in eternity. It’s not the way we perceive things. From our perspective, the first will be last and the last first.

IV. The Cup that Jesus Drinks – 10:32-45

- a. The response to Jesus is amazement and fear (v. 32). Jesus' standards and actions are so different from the disciples (and ours) that they continue to be amazed by him.
 - b. Jesus gives a detailed description of what awaits him in Jerusalem (vv. 33-34). He invokes the image of the glorified Son of Man from Daniel 7:13-14. Yet his prophecy sounds nothing like being glorified. This is no description of a hero that anyone in Rome could recognize, Jew or Gentile. The crucial point, however, is "after three days he will rise again."
 - c. James and John, once again being clueless and apparently not having understood a word that Jesus has said (this has to be both comforting and disturbing since we're often in the same position), ask Jesus to give them whatever they want (!).
 - d. They want to sit at Jesus' right and left hand in his glory. The irony is that they are essentially asking to be the two thieves who are crucified with Jesus since the cross *is* his glory (John 12:23).
 - e. Whether it's the hidden glory of the cross or the glory of Christ's return, this is something for which one cannot ask. The disciples think they can drink the same cup as Jesus. Yet Jesus' cup is the wrath of God, the penalty for sin (Mark 14:36; Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17-23; Jer. 25:15-28).
 - f. Jesus reminds the disciples that the way of the world is domination, the strong over the weak. It is not to be that way with his followers.
 - g. Jesus concludes with a summary of his whole mission. He has come as the servant (Isa. 53). He gives his life as a ransom for his people. "Ransom" means to buy back. In this context it refers to the offering for sin in the Old Testament (Lev. 5:14-6:7; Numbers 5:5-10; Isa. 53:10). The sin offering removed the offense and restored the person both to God and to the community. Jesus Christ is our once and for all sin offering (II Cor. 5:21).
- We have to read all the demands of this chapter in the light of v. 45: Jesus covers all our sin.**

V. The Healing of Bartimaeus vv. 46-52

- a. Having carried us along with the disciples, "greatly astounded" at all Jesus has said, Mark ends this section with an account of Jesus' complete mercy.
- b. Bartimeus' crying out for mercy annoys people around him and they tell him to be quiet (When people ask us how we are, do they really want to know?). We can easily be annoyed at people who talk too readily or loudly about their misfortunes.
- c. Jesus is not like the crowd. The crowd is not merciful, but Jesus is. As David said, let us not fall into human hands but into God's hands because God is merciful (II Sam. 24:14).
- d. Once Jesus calls Bartimaeus, others in the crowd (or the ones who formerly had criticized him) now encourage him.

- e. We are to take heart because Jesus is calling us (v. 49).
- f. Bartimaeus' simple faith saves him. This is the essence of the Gospel (Mark 2:5; 5:34). He then follows Jesus.

Questions for us –

1. Do you find this lengthy chapter encouraging or discouraging? Why?
2. How do we come to terms with the basic reality that Jesus' way is not our way? Jesus' priorities for marriage, children and discipleship are not ours.
3. How would you compare the rich young man with Bartimaeus?
4. In what ways do we, like James and John, simply want Jesus "to do for us whatever we ask?"
5. If Jesus has come to serve us and is our ransom from sin, then shouldn't we be the most hopeful and confident people in the world in spite of all our failings? How do we communicate this to others?

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

Chapter eleven shows the power of Jesus and the purpose of his coming to Jerusalem. Jesus' coming is both a judgment and a hope. His entrance on Palm Sunday is full of the symbolism of the great kings of Israel, the Messiah and the Lord who will come again at the end of history. He comes to a Jerusalem that is spiritually a withered fig tree. Yet his authority and indeed the salvation he will bring do not depend on people understanding him or accepting him.

- I. The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem – 11:1-11
 - a. The setting is the Mount of Olives – 11:1; Zech. 14:4
 - b. The disciples are commanded to go into the village where they will “immediately” (also v. 3) find a colt that has never been ridden – 11:2; Num. 19:2; Deut. 21:3; I Sam. 6:7; II Sam. 6:3; cf. Homer’s *Iliad* VI. 94 – The Trojans sacrifice to Athena with the “fairest robe” and twelve heifers who have never felt a yoke. The idea here, both from Biblical and pagan sources, is that there is a special honor in spreading cloaks and offering animals that have never been ridden or yoked.
 - c. The statement, “the Lord needs it” is sufficient both for the disciples and the bystanders – 11:3-6
 - d. People throw their cloaks on the colt and Jesus sits on it – 11:7; II Kings 9:12-13
 - e. Others spread “leafy branches” – 11:8; Ps. 118:27
 - i. Imagery of the Feast of Booths (Sukot). This was one of the festivals which God had ordained for Israel. It was a harvest festival celebrated with branches of palm trees and leafy trees. Its purpose was to remind Israel that it lived in booths during its sojourn in the wilderness after being delivered from slavery in Egypt. – Lev. 23:39-40; Neh. 8:15; Ex. 23:16 – It was celebrated for seven days. This was followed by “complete rest on the eighth day” – the first day of the week. This prefigures Jesus’ resurrection. – Mark 16:2. God rested on the seventh day of creation (Gen. 2:2). Jesus’ resurrection has been called the eighth day of creation, the day of the new creation. This Sabbath rest is eternal, symbolizing eternal life (Hebrews 4:8-9).
 - ii. Reversal of the imagery of idolatry. Ancient people worshipped fertility gods under leafy trees (Deut. 12:2-3; Ezek. 20:28; Jer. 3:9). Israel was commanded to avoid such worship. These gods were either idols or demons (Deut. 12:4; 17:6-7; Jer. 7:16-18). Jesus as the true God overcomes the idols and false gods.
 - f. Jesus enters Jerusalem as the Messianic King. This carries with it a number of important references. – 11:9-11

- i. Jesus is the great king who enters Jerusalem in great power and great humility. - Zech. 9:9; Ps. 118:25-27
- ii. Jesus is the true God whose worship replaces that of the false gods.
- iii. Jesus is the revelation of God who will descend from the Mount of Olives to save Israel. In this sense, the entrance into Jerusalem symbolizes the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. – Zech. 14:1-8

Obviously, people at the time, including the disciples, did not realize that all this was prophesying both the fulfillment of the Old Testament and the coming reign of God. Yet as the disciples reflected on the event, they, like we, can realize the full dimension of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

II. The Cursing of the Fig Tree and Cleansing of the Temple – 11:12-25

- a. On the face of it, Jesus' cursing of the fig tree seems unreasonable and arbitrary. There is no fruit on the tree, but Mark tells us that "it was not the season for figs." Jesus' anger and subsequent cursing of the tree sounds like simple annoyance, more like the pagan gods than Jesus. This event has to be seen as a commentary on the middle action of Jesus overturning the money changers in the temple. The church in Rome to which we believe this gospel was written was probably made up mostly of Gentiles. It does seem (also from Paul's Letter to the Romans) that there were Jews in the congregation (who would have had to have returned since their expulsion earlier by the Roman Emperor, Claudius (Acts 18:2)).
- b. In this passage one action interprets another. The fig tree is a symbol of Israel. The rejection of the Jewish leaders leaves them, like the tree, barren and cursed. While in the case of the tree itself, the fact that it is not the season for figs is a purely natural situation. However the absence of fruit in Jesus' own people who reject him is an unnatural situation, brought on by their own choice. Mark here is really focusing on the Jewish leaders rather than the people themselves.
- c. Some of the key themes in this passage are the following:
 - i. Israel in the Old Testament is often described as a fig tree that bears no fruit – Jer. 8:13; Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:7; Micah 7:1-6.
 - ii. Jesus quotes two Old Testament passages as he cleanses the temple
 - 1. The first, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people," Isa. 56:7, refers to God's universal plan for the nations. Israel will not be alone in this plan nor does Israel have a special status of superiority (Isa. 19:19-24).

2. The second, "But you have made it a den of robbers," Jer. 7:11 refers to Israel's faithlessness and idolatry.
- iii. It is important to recognize that the religious leaders are afraid of Jesus. His authority speaks for itself in his spellbinding teaching (11:18-19)
- iv. The only answer to the judgment Jesus brings and will take upon himself in the cross is "Have faith in God." This is not a question of degrees of faith but simple faith itself, a faith that yields everything up to God (Mark 9:24).
- v. Prayer is not magic. Nor is it simply getting what we want (as was the case in the last chapter with James and John (10:35)). Prayer is ultimately an act of faith in which we succumb to God's will. This is how Jesus prays in Gethsemane. He asks for the "cup" of suffering to be taken away. Yet then he prays, "not my will but yours be done" (Mark 14:36).
- vi. Finally, Jesus makes it clear that prayer without forgiving others is not a prayer of faith. We need to forgive if we have "anything against anyone" (11:25).

III. Jesus Does Not Answer – 11:27-33

- a. The religious leaders try to trap Jesus again. They ask him what his authority for doing what he does is. The question cannot be answered. Jesus himself is the authority (Mark 1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15).
- b. Rather than answer, Jesus asks a question about the authority of John the Baptist.
- c. The hidden motives of the leaders are exposed when they acknowledge, at least to themselves, that they will not give an honest answer. Their answer is predicated on the reactions they think they will get from Jesus or the crowds.
- d. Jesus has no time for their trick questions. He simply will not answer them.

Questions for us –

1. Why do you think Jesus seems to be so little understood (once again) by everyone around him? What does that say about our understanding him?
2. Why do you think that people are afraid of Jesus? This includes his disciples as well as his enemies. (Mark 9:32; 10:32; 11:18).
3. How do we understand the authority of Jesus? In what ways do we simply obey him as the disciples and even the bystanders did? In what ways do we subtly question him as the religious leaders try to do?
4. What can we learn from Jesus' linking forgiveness to faith in prayer? (Mark 11:23-26)

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

In chapter twelve, Jesus is preparing for the major conflict of his ministry. He has now entered Jerusalem. Here he will “be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death” (10:33-34). In Mark’s Gospel, the chief opponents are spiritual, the forces of darkness (1:13, 23-27; 3:11-12; 5:1-13; 6:7). In this chapter, these forces are represented by the religious leaders. Unwittingly, they are uniting in preparation to do the work of Satan (8:33). One of them will recognize the true authority of Jesus. The rest are simply out to get him.

I. The Unmasking of the Enemies – 12:1-12

- a. Jesus tells another parable. A man plants a vineyard and leases it out to tenants while he goes to another country. The listeners would recognize this parable as based on Isaiah 5:1-12. They also recognize that he is not only accusing them of unfaithfulness, but of tremendous greed.
- b. When the vineyard is ready to be harvested, the owner sends a slave to collect his share of the produce. The tenants beat the slave. The owner sends many others whom the tenants beat or kill. The parable also demonstrates the longsuffering nature of the owner. It would be expected that after even the first slave was beaten and rejected, he would have returned in force to throw out the unjust tenants.
- c. Finally, he sends his son. They refer to him as “the heir” which means they probably think the owner is now dead. By killing the heir, they believe they can seize the property, so they kill him and throw him out of the vineyard. If the vineyard represents Israel, Jesus is thrown out and killed outside of it by being taken to Calvary outside the city gates. This parable simply illustrates Jesus’ detailed prophecy of 10:32-34.
- d. This parable also represents the coming judgment of God on those who have killed his son. Jesus confirms his teaching with a quote from Ps. 118:22-23.
- e. The religious leaders recognize themselves in Jesus’ parable and plan to trap him since they are afraid to arrest him openly. Jesus remains popular with the crowds (v. 12).

II. Three Tests – 12:13-34

- a. Realizing the threat Jesus posed, some leaders come to trap him. Their intent is to ask him an impossible question. They ask if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. They begin with false praise claiming that he teaches “the way of God in accordance with truth.” Of course, they don’t believe this. The trap they present is obvious. If Jesus says not to pay taxes, he can be arrested for sedition. If he says to pay them, they can claim that he supports Rome and is not loyal to Israel.
- b. Jesus works out of the trap easily. First, he asks *them* for a Roman coin. The emperor’s face is stamped on it. Jesus simply says then, “Give to the

emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (v. 17). The beauty of this is that Jesus never defines what things belong to the emperor and what things belong to God. Clearly, the coin belongs to the emperor, but the world belongs to God (Ps. 24:1).

- c. Jesus' enemies, like the disciples, are "utterly amazed."
- d. In the second test, the Sadducees, who only accepted the five books of Moses (the Torah) as Scripture and did not believe in the resurrection, ask another trick question. According to the law of Moses, if a man died without a child, his brother (or even a relative as in the Book of Ruth) was to marry the widow so she could bear children for the family (Deut. 25:5-6). The question the Sadducees ask is if a woman goes through seven husbands (!), whose husband would she be in the resurrection. Their intent is to mock the idea of a resurrection.
- e. Jesus bluntly responds that they do not know the scriptures (v. 24). Of course, they only recognize five books as being scriptural. Jesus responds from the books of Moses which they do accept. Jesus quotes Ex. 3:6 that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yet God is the God of the living not of the dead. This means that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must in some sense still live. They live in the resurrection. This is not the original meaning of the Exodus passage, but Jesus makes a logical deduction from the text and once again confounds his enemies.
- f. The third test comes from a scribe who overhears the previous two and apparently thinks that he can trap Jesus more successfully. He asks Jesus which commandment is the "first of all." He doesn't mean first in order, but first in importance. Jesus summarizes the whole Ten Commandments in two quotes, one from Deut. 6:4-5 on worshipping God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and then he adds a second one, taken from Lev. 19:18, loving your neighbor as yourself.
- g. The scribe, contrary to those who preceded him, now recognizes Jesus as a Teacher. Jesus says to him that he is not far from the kingdom of God (v. 34). The tables have been turned. Jesus has gone from being questioned to being the questioner. No one else dared to ask him anything.

III. Jesus Asks a Question – 12:35-37

- a. Jesus now puts a question to his critics. He notes that they say that the Messiah will be the Son of David. This was the view of the Messiah that had developed in Israel.
- b. Jesus, however, notes that David, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (v. 36; II Sam. 23:1-2; II Tim. 3:16), calls the Messiah "Lord" (Ps. 110:1). How then, Jesus asks, can he be David's son? No one can answer his question because Jesus is introducing his divinity into the role of the Messiah.
- c. The crowd continues to listen to him with delight (v. 37).

IV. Jesus Moves to the Offensive – 12:38-44

- a. Jesus now attacks the religious leaders whom he has already called hypocrites (v. 15).
- b. Jesus says that the religious leaders expect privileged treatment (vv. 38-39).
- c. More seriously, their income comes from foreclosing on widows' homes (v. 40). Widows are under God's special protection (Ps. 68:5).
- d. Jesus then continues with the theme of widows, calling his disciples' attention to the offerings brought into the Temple treasury. He disregards the rich giving large sums and focuses on a widow who gives two coins (Mark explains their value for his Roman audience).
- e. The key thing about the widow is that she had two small coins. Rather than keep one for herself, she gave both to the treasury. Hence, Jesus says she gave more than all the others (vv. 43-44).

Questions for us –

- 1. What can we learn from Jesus' example of answering "trick questions"? Do people sometimes ask us questions about our faith as though it were ridiculous (see Bill Maher for example)?
- 2. What can we learn from Jesus' attitude in responding to people who are hostile? How is Jesus open to his critics? How is he somewhat defiant?
- 3. How can we depend more on the scriptures since Jesus himself depends so much on them (v. 24)?
- 4. What do Jesus' comments about the widow say to us about wealth, power and giving? How do Jesus' comments relate to our present financial crisis?

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

In the thirteenth chapter, Jesus is asked by the disciples about the end of history. This is a topic that has fascinated people throughout history. Jesus does not give a literal timetable. What he does is describe the events that will lead up to his return in glory. As in the case of other examples of prophecy, the references are both symbolic (John the Baptist as the fulfillment of Elijah coming before the Messiah, 9:12-13; Matt. 17:10-13) or general (as to Christ being in the tomb the “three days and three nights” that Jonah was in the sea monster which of course was not literally the case, Matt. 12:40). The purpose of Jesus’ teaching here is not to satisfy our curiosity, but to prepare us for faithful service in uncertain times and to give us hope and confidence.

I. The Signs of the End – 13:1-23

- a. Jesus and the disciples have just come out of the temple. One of the disciples remarks how impressive it is. Jesus answers that the temple, in spite of its impressive appearance, will be completely destroyed, “Not one stone will be left upon another” (v. 2). This symbolizes two things. The building of the temple is being replaced by Jesus himself who is the personification of the temple (14:28; John 2:18-22). Second, it symbolizes God’s judgment on his people. In the Old Testament, the destruction of the temple was a sign of God’s judgment on the unfaithfulness of Israel (Micah 3:12; Jer. 26:18; II Chron. 36:15-19). The present temple, built by Herod, would be destroyed in the great war that took place in 66-70 A.D. (or CE).
- b. Jesus’ warning about the end does not begin with events in the world or society at large. They begin in the community of faith with the appearances of false christs or anti-christs. These false christs will lead many astray (v. 6; I John 2:18). This danger is consistently presented in the New Testament. There will be figures claiming to be Christ or presentations of Christ that are not faithful to the Scriptures. The testimony of Scripture is our only sure protection against this kind of deceit (Acts 20:28-31). Combining the gospel with myths has always been popular (II Tim. 4:3-4). The recurring theme of this gospel, and indeed of the whole New Testament, is that Jesus is fulfilling the Scriptures (Matt. 2:17, 23; 4:14; 13:14; 26:24; Mark 14:49; Luke 4:21; 22:37; John 17:12; 19:36).
- c. Jesus describes a period of ongoing upheaval, wars, earthquakes and famines. These will continue throughout history. Christians may sorrow over these but we are not to be alarmed (v. 7).
- d. Jesus then describes what will happen *following* his death and resurrection. His followers will be persecuted and beaten. They will be oppressed by the political leaders of “this present age.” Again, this is not to be a cause of alarm. The gospel will go forth to “all nations” (v. 10).

The Holy Spirit will enable Jesus' disciples to say the right thing (v.11). There will be betrayal even within families (v. 12). Opposition will be fierce (v. 13). Jesus paints the very opposite of a time of peace and tranquility, much less earthly prosperity. His call is to endure until the end (v. 13).

- e. Jesus now returns to the original question about the fate of the temple. Jesus is predicting the fate of Judah and Jerusalem in the devastating war of 66-70 CE. This not only affected Israel but the whole Roman Empire. From the madness of Nero to his death and afterwards, the whole Empire was in convulsions. In the year 69, there were no fewer than four different emperors. The Roman historian Tacitus described this period as "full of horrors" and "terrible calamities." The point is that all of this had been foretold by Jesus (vv.14-23; Luke 23:28-31). Jesus draws on the past history of "desolating sacrilege" which had been prophesied by Daniel (9:27).
- f. Again this is not an exact literal description of the events of 66-70, but it captures the idea of the upheaval and destruction which in fact did occur. These events in turn are symbolic of what will go on throughout history up until Christ's return. Again, Jesus' prophecy has proven all too true.

II. The Great Hope- 13:24-37

- a. Then in the midst of the suffering of "those days," Jesus will appear from heaven. The description of him as Son of Man comes also from Daniel (7:13-14, "human being" in the New Revised Standard is literally "one like a son of man").
- b. Believers in Christ have the ultimate hope that we will be gathered to Jesus "from the four winds." This signifies the whole world. That there would be followers of Jesus in the four corners of the world would have been amazing to the disciples listening to Jesus. We are not to lose hope or confidence facing the "suffering" that recurs throughout history. At the same time, we are not to regard ourselves as some privileged group immune to all the upheaval. Following Jesus' example, we are to go to the aid of those in suffering and distress (3:7-11).
- c. Jesus now comes to the practical implications of his teaching for the disciples and for us:
 - i. We are to recognize the signs that "summer is near." In other words, the times of suffering and upheaval are to remind us that Jesus has promised to return. He will return "soon."
 - ii. Jesus guarantees that his promise is faithful by stating that "this generation" will have seen "all these things." This doesn't refer to his coming again, but rather to all the things associated with the throwing down of the temple. The fact is that within forty years, a Biblical generation, the events described in vv.9-22 had occurred, even the theme that the gospel had been preached to "all nations," at least initially. Paul, in Romans 15:19-23, has at least

proclaimed the gospel to most of the known world of the Roman Empire.

- iii. Jesus goes on to say that not even he knows the day or hour when his return will occur, thereby clarifying the “these things” of v. 30. “Day” in Scripture can refer to an event or a period, “Day of the Lord,” I Thess. 5:2; “day of wrath,” Rom. 2:5; Jesus’ “day,” John 8:56).
- iv. Jesus calls the disciples and us to “keep alert.” Like servants waiting for the return of their master we need to be ready because we don’t know the day (broader time) or hour (exact time) of Jesus’ return.
- v. What is most important is that his return is certain. Our confidence and hope should never waver. We need to pay attention. Jesus’ ends with these words, “Keep awake” (v. 37).

Questions for us –

1. Do we find Jesus’ predictions of a continuing pattern of “wars and rumors of wars” distressing? How does it affect us when we realize that Jesus knows what will happen and ultimately oversees it?
2. Jesus prepares us for a time of “suffering” (v. 24). Why do you think this is? Is this part of his call to take up our cross in following him (8:34)? How does that make you feel?
3. What difference does it make, or should it make, for us to live lives alert and awake, anticipating Jesus’ return? This hope has sustained Christians for the past two thousand years. Do you find this hope difficult because we don’t know the day or the hour of his coming? Why do you think this hasn’t been revealed to us? What is the benefit of living in a state of expectant waiting?

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

The fourteenth chapter of Mark begins the account of Jesus' death. It opens with Jesus' preparations for the Passover Meal and ends with Peter's denial of Jesus. This section includes also Judas' betrayal, Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane and the religious leaders' plans to kill him. For Mark's readers, living in the time of Nero, this whole passage is a somber warning of the need to remain faithful, alert and awake in following Jesus. This same warning applies to us as well.

I. The Last Supper – 14:1-31

- a. This scene takes place in the middle of Holy Week, probably Wednesday. The religious leaders plan to kill Jesus but they must be careful lest there is an uprising on the part of the people which would lead to severe Roman retaliation. v.1
- b. Jesus is spending the evening at the home of Simon the Leper (who may have been cured by him). An unknown woman anoints his head with precious ointment (vv. 3-4). This is doubly important. Anointing the head does not so much suggest anointing the dead as it does anointing a king (cf. I Samuel 16:13). The fact that this act is performed by a nameless woman, rather than a male priest or prophet, is also significant. A famous Jewish prayer began, “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has not made me a woman” (Obviously this was only prayed by men!).
- c. The woman is scolded by angry critics (vv. 4-9). Jesus will have none of this. The objection is that the ointment could have been sold to benefit the poor. Jesus responds that the poor will need attention throughout history (Deut. 15:11). This is a special moment. The judgmental attitude of those present represents Jesus' followers at their worst. It is understandable that Jesus has no patience with them and affirms that what she has done will be remembered throughout history (v. 9).
- d. Judas Iscariot plans to betray Jesus. No motive is given for his actions, though he will be well paid (thirty pieces of silver). The religious leaders are pleased because they assume (rightly) that they will be able to arrest Jesus in some private setting. vv. 10-11
- e. Jesus prepares for the celebration of Passover. Clearly, he has made advance arrangements. He tells the two disciples to look for a man carrying a jar of water. It would be unusual for a man to be performing this task. Usually women carried water. Jesus has arranged for a guest room to observe the Passover. vv. 12-17
- f. As they begin the meal Jesus announces that one of them will betray him. All of the disciples are distressed at the news and ask, “Surely, not I?” This suggests that each of them saw himself as a potential betrayer of Jesus. Jesus announces that the Son of Man (himself) goes “as it

was written” but that does not absolve the betrayer of his guilt. This again underscores the authority of the written word for Jesus (in this case the Old Testament, cf. 12: 24). The “one who is dipping bread” is the fulfillment of Psalm 41:9.

- g. Jesus establishes the communion at this last Passover supper. The bread is his body. The cup is his blood. The word, “many,” here is a synonym for “all” (cf. 1:32, 34 where they are used in a parallel form. This passage is not saying that Jesus simply casts out some of the demons). Jesus’ death is for all, the whole world, cf. 10:45; John 12:32; I John 2:2; Rom. 5:18-19. There will be a final communion when he returns. This may also refer to the Messianic Banquet mentioned elsewhere, Luke 13:29; Rev. 19:9.
- h. They sing a hymn and go out to the Mount of Olives. Jesus indicates that another prophecy is going to be fulfilled. They will desert him. He quotes from the prophet, Zechariah, chapter 13, verse 7.
- i. Jesus offers them the hope that he will gather them together in Galilee after his resurrection. Peter protests that he will never deny Jesus. Jesus assures Peter that, tragically, in fact, he will. vv. 28-31

II. Jesus in Gethsemane vv. 32-52

- a. Jesus goes to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. He takes Peter, James and John with him. Commentators describe this scene as one of “shuddering horror.” There is a mythical theme throughout history of the “fantastic four.” A hero is sustained and supported by three comrades. Odysseus is supported by his son and two servants. Other examples include Robin Hood with Little John, Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet, D’Artagnon and the three musketeers and Frodo with Sam, Merry and Pippin. In Jesus’ case there is no “fantastic four.” Rather than being supported in his hour of testing, the three disciples fall asleep, more than once. vv. 32-42
- b. Jesus prays that the cup be removed. The cup is the cup of God’s wrath on sin. Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17.
- c. Jesus surrenders, “yet not what I want, but what you want.” – v. 36
- d. Verse 43 introduces another “immediately.” Judas comes to betray Jesus. Again Jesus expresses his trust in Scripture (v. 49). Presumably it is Peter who cuts off the servant’s ear but in this gospel based on Peter, the incident is not emphasized.
- e. Jesus’ prophecy that all would desert him comes true – v. 50.
- f. Many believe that the “certain young man” (v. 51) is Mark himself. He too deserts in a scene that is almost comic.

III. Jesus on Trial vv. 53-72

- a. Jesus is taken to the home of the high priest to appear before the whole council of Jewish leaders. This was not a formal trial but more a hearing. The leaders are preparing to present a charge to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. vv. 53-55

- b. Many false witnesses testify contradicting themselves. vv. 57-59
- c. The climactic moment comes when the high priest asks Jesus directly if he is “the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus replies, “I am.” The Messianic Secret is over. Jesus now answers directly and adds that the Son of Man will appear at the right hand of the Power coming with the clouds of heaven. The high priest cries out that this is blasphemy. To claim to be the Messiah or the Son of Man would not have been blasphemous statements in themselves. However the reference to being at the right hand of God (the “Power”) suggested someone equal to God. This, of course, sounded like blasphemy. All condemn Jesus to death. Their brutal treatment of him is a direct fulfillment of his own prophecy (10:33-34). Under both Jewish and Roman law, they could have stoned him on the spot (see the example of Stephen in Acts 7). However, clearly they want the Romans to carry out the execution. They may still be afraid of the reaction of the common people. They may also want to see Jesus publicly humiliated and cursed (Deut. 21:22-23) as a warning against Jesus’ followers or other would be messiahs. vv. 60-65
- d. In the final scene, Peter does deny Jesus three times, just as Jesus said (v. 30). Peter himself obviously is the source for this account. The denial is made all the more painful by its being repeated and Peter’s dishonest indignation including oaths and cursing. The dark scene ends with Peter breaking down and weeping. vv. 66-72

Questions for us –

1. What does it mean for us to consider seriously Jesus’ dedication to the task of dying for our salvation? He planned every detail beginning with the man carrying a jar of water (v. 13). He knew the harsh treatment was coming and accepted it. He acknowledged the terror but submitted to God’s will. How should all this affect how we live as Christians?
2. Mark clearly wrote this initially to sustain the faith of the Roman Christians facing Nero. How do we apply this to our own lives, seeing the disciples’ negative example of falling asleep, abandoning Jesus and denying him? Do we see ourselves as having the potential to deny Jesus (“Surely, not I?”)?
3. How should Jesus’ continual reliance on Scripture motivate and guide us (vv. 21, 49)?
4. What do we learn from the role of unnamed disciples like the woman who anoints Jesus’ head? Her story has been told throughout the centuries as Jesus foretold, but we don’t even know her name. Why do you think that is?

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

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Mark’s gospel ends with a triumphant picture of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Mark emphasizes that Jesus chooses his fate. The activities of Pilate, the chief priests, the scribes, even the crowds, all play into God’s appointed plan. Jesus’ death goes “as it is written of him” (14:21). Mark’s Roman audience would have been well aware of all the stories of Redeemer Heroes up to and including the deified Caesar Augustus. Jesus is the ultimate redeemer hero giving his life as “a ransom for many” (10:45). Jesus is not portrayed here as weak and broken on the cross, but as the ultimate hero who embraces his chosen God-forsaken destiny. God the Father does not ultimately forsake him, but raises him from the grave. This event is so astounding that it inspires “terror and amazement” in those who first encounter it. The gospel message is complete. Jesus Christ is completely revealed as the “Son of God” (1:1).

I. The Trial Before Pilate – 15:1-20

- a. The elders, scribes and the council hand Jesus over to Pilate. The charge against him has to be a political one for Pilate to take the case. The accusation is that Jesus is “the King of the Jews,” and therefore a threat to Rome.
- b. Pilate asks him an explicit question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus’ answer appears evasive, “You say so.” Many accusations are made against Jesus. Pilate asks Jesus, “Have you no answer?” Jesus says nothing and Pilate is amazed.
- c. We know enough about Pilate from secular sources to realize that he had a very negative relationship with the Jews. He realizes that the chief priests had brought Jesus before him to satisfy their own agenda (“he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over,” v. 10). Pilate then attempts to put the chief priests on the defensive by offering to release Jesus to the crowds. Pilate no doubt realizes that Jesus is no threat to Rome while Barabbas clearly is. Yet the crowds have been coached by the chief priests to cry for Barabbas. The appeal of Barabbas for them may have been the perception that he was a “freedom fighter.” Pilate is clearly surprised by the choice. In response to their cry for Jesus to be crucified rather than released, he asks them, “Why, what evil has he done?”
- d. The crowd shouts all the more, “Crucify him!” The exact motivation for their opposition to Jesus is not made clear. What is clear is that Jesus’ prediction of his fate is being fulfilled exactly as he said (10:33-34). Pilate does not want problems with the crowd during the Passover season, so he agrees to their wishes.
- e. The soldiers bring Jesus out to the Praetorium (a term that would be clear to Mark’s readers, but not to us, so we have an editorial explanation, “the governor’s headquarters.” This further underscores the identity of the Roman audience to which the gospel was originally directed).

- f. The soldiers mock Jesus and treat him as a delusional king. Again, this fulfills the prophecies of Jesus (10:34). The irony is that what the soldiers say in their mocking of Jesus is, in fact, true. One day, they will bow before the exalted Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:10-11). Mark already seems aware of this irony.

II. Jesus on the Cross – 15:21-39

- a. The soldiers compel Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross. No reason is given for this. For Mark, Jesus goes to his death as the ultimate Redeemer Hero. It is almost as though it is beneath his dignity to carry his own cross in spite of that being the accepted practice. According to John, Jesus carries his own cross to the place of crucifixion (19:17). The scene here may be a continuation of the mocking treatment of Jesus as a king. Hence the soldiers get someone else to carry his cross as though in deference to a king. Jesus has been struck and beaten as well as flogged. How far this ill treatment extended is not emphasized (in spite of the lurid depictions in Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*). This treatment, however, is not out of the ordinary for criminals or those sentenced to death. The emphasis is on his being mocked and humiliated (vv. 16-20). Apparently, Simon's sons, Alexander and Rufus, were known to Mark's audience.
- b. Jesus will not drink the wine. He is not trying to avoid the pain (v. 23).
- c. He is taken to Golgotha. Once again, Mark has to translate for his Roman audience. It is the place of a skull. The horror of the setting is emphasized.
- d. Apparently, victims of crucifixion were naked. This emphasized both their shame and their vulnerability. The soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothes (not just his robe) in fulfillment of Ps. 22:18.
- e. Again, there is irony in the inscription placed above him, "the King of the Jews." Intended to mock him, this is, of course, true. The theme of mocking continues to be the emphasis of Mark's account (vv. 29-32). Mark's audience would have known the story of *The Odyssey* very well. At the climax of that story, Odysseus, in the guise of a beggar, is being humiliated and mocked by the nobles who have taken over his home. They are unaware of the great victory he is about to win over them. A similar motif is taking place in Mark's gospel.
- f. At noon, darkness comes over the whole land. Jesus cries out in a loud voice. Several things are to be noted about this. Jesus has been on the cross for six hours and he still has the strength to cry out in a loud voice. Earlier, Mark has used the expression of crying out in a loud voice to describe the superhuman outcries of the demonic (1:26; 5:7). Here, Jesus is confronting the full force of sin, death, hell, Satan and all his demons. His cry (which again has to be translated for the Romans) is the opening verse of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is the only statement from the cross which Mark records. It is a cry simultaneously of despair and victory. Mark follows this up with a final

loud cry and Jesus gives up his life. The two unusual things about this are Jesus' strength to give loud cries and the fact that he dies so quickly. The picture of death by crucifixion (ultimately asphyxiation and exhaustion) involved groaning and a slow, lingering death. Jesus' death is sudden and triumphant. The curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom.

- g. The centurion seeing this says, "Truly, this man was a son of God." The centurion presumably has no deeper understanding of who Jesus is. For him, Jesus has shown the power of the ancient Redeemer Heroes like Achilles and Hercules. The centurion's statement contrasts with the reaction of the high priest when Jesus spoke of himself as "seated at the right hand of the Power" (14:62). The point to be noted here is that Jesus' death, while unjust, tragic and shameful, is also powerful and victorious (Col. 2:13-15; Hebrews 2:14; I John 3:8). Even a pagan Roman can recognize the power of Jesus. Pilate later seems surprised that Jesus had died so quickly (v. 44).

III. The Burial of Jesus – 15:40-47

- a. Three women are mentioned as "looking on from a distance." There may be several reasons for this, not the least was Jesus' shameful appearance.
- b. We are told that there were "many other women" who had followed him. Too often, this fact has not been appreciated (Luke 8:1-3).
- c. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the council whom we are told elsewhere did not vote against Jesus (Luke 23:50-51), asks for Jesus' body. Pilate grants his request.
- d. Joseph places the body in a tomb. The stone rolled against it was probably to guard against the uncleanness under Jewish law of any contact with a corpse (Numbers 5:2). This account ends with the news that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus see where Jesus is laid.

IV. The Resurrection - 16:1-8

- a. When the Sabbath was over, in other words, Saturday night after sunset, the women buy spices to anoint Jesus' body. Normally, dead bodies were anointed with oil. Spices were used to anoint the body of a king (II Chron. 16:14).
- b. They come to the tomb "very early on the first day of the week," but it is after sunrise. They wonder who will roll away the stone so they may enter and anoint the body. This human concern is understandable but, as we will see, it is completely irrelevant.
- c. The women find the stone rolled away and a "young man dressed in a white robe" sitting in the tomb. The white robe is a reference perhaps to the Transfiguration ((9:3). They are alarmed. The reaction of alarm and

amazement has run through Mark's entire gospel (1:27; 2:12; 5:20, 42; 6:6; 10:32; 12:17; 13:7; 15:5).

- d.** The "young man" tells them not to be alarmed and then gives the startling message that Jesus of Nazareth "has been raised." The focus of the New Testament message is on God the Father raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:24; 3:15; 4:10; Rom. 4:24; 8:11; I Cor. 6:14; 15:15; I Peter 1:21).
- e.** The women are told to go and tell the disciples. The Messianic Secret is a secret no more.
- f.** Peter's name is added for emphasis both because of Peter's authorship role and confirmation that Jesus has not denied Peter.
- g.** The women flee in terror and amazement. They are afraid and say nothing (for the moment at least).
- h.** The oldest manuscripts end the gospel abruptly at this point. Commentators have wondered if the gospel was unfinished, hence the later additions to bring it to a more complete conclusion. Yet this ending is consistent with Mark's stark and dramatic style throughout.

Questions for us –

- i. For Mark, the principal mistreatment of Jesus is the mocking that he endures throughout the trial and on the cross. What does it mean for us to realize that Jesus' claims were greeted with scorn and derision? Have we been mocked for our faith in Jesus? How does this gospel help us with those experiences?
- ii. Jesus is a very powerful figure in Mark, even in his death. The Roman Centurion sees him as "a son of God." How does this picture of Jesus encourage and challenge us in our walk of faith?
- iii. The women at the tomb are amazed and frightened. Do we sometimes take Jesus, and the gospel in general, for granted? What benefit do you think there may be in a reaction of amazement and even fear?