



MARK, THE MAN, MADE SERVANT

Catalog No. 1102

Mark

First Message

Brian Morgan

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Seventy-one thousand people went to hear Billy Graham during his three-night crusade in the San Jose Arena. Almost five thousand people came forward. Why did all those thousands come to hear an unsophisticated country preacher who is approaching eighty years of age? And what was it that brought all those people forward? I think it was two things: the purity of the message, and the integrity of the messenger. The message was untainted by show, manipulation or false promises. It was pure gospel. And it was delivered by a messenger untainted by the love of money, power or sex. What a rare combination in this day and age. And what better motivation to read the great evangelist's autobiography, *Just As I Am*.

As we begin a new series in the gospel of Mark today, I want to return to the simplicity of that message by studying together the very first gospel written. The gospels were an utterly new literary genre. Nothing like them existed before in the ancient world. And the message of the gospels, of course, has totally transformed Western civilization.

Did you ever wonder how these gospel stories got written down and who wrote them? Before we look at the message itself, I want to focus on the life of the messenger who gave us the first gospel. This is the story of a man who grew up in wealth and privilege only to taste the bitter fruit of failure, but God used that failure to turn him into an extraordinary servant. One reason this book has such power is that the life of the messenger was shaped by its message itself. So when we read the theme verse at the center of the story, where Jesus describes his mission in these words,

For even the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45, NASB),

we begin to realize how deeply this theme resonated in the life of the writer, Mark. For him, each word contained an sea of emotion, because God made him into such a servant.

I. Mark's Background: Privilege & Opportunity

A. His life of privilege

Who was this John Mark? John was his Hebrew name, Mark his Greek name. Because he is referred to as Mark, the son of Mary (Acts 12:12), it is likely that his father had died young and that the boy grew up fatherless. His mother Mary apparently was a wealthy widow

whose home became the stage for the early disciples of Jesus. Since our Lord had very few contacts in Jerusalem, this home could well have been the site for the Last Supper. Some scholars surmise that it might even have been Mark himself who made preparations for that evening by carrying a jug of water on his head, thereby giving the secret signal for the location where the disciples would partake of their final Passover meal with Jesus.

Though Mark was not an apostle, some of the church fathers include him as one of the seventy who were sent out by the Lord. It is highly probable that he was an eyewitness to Jesus' arrest. The following cryptic description appears only in Mark's gospel of an event that occurred during that arrest in Gethsemane:

And a certain young man was following Him, wearing nothing but a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. But he left the linen sheet behind, and escaped naked (Mark 14:51-52).

Michael Green¹ speculates that this anonymous young man could have well been Mark. "He was just a young man of sixteen or seventeen trying to sleep on the roof of his home in Jerusalem, one evening in April, a time when the temperature can rise to 80 or 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Unable to sleep, and having a sense of foreboding, Mark climbed down the drain pipe of his house, made his way to the Kidron, crossed the stream, and entered the darkness of Gethsemane. There he was captured by the sight of the Lord in prayer. Suddenly, Jesus is besieged by the lights of torches. Mark hears the swish of swords being drawn. Then comes the kiss of Judas. Mark himself is grabbed by soldiers, but he escapes, running away naked, leaving behind his linen robe." Perhaps this is prefiguring Jesus, who would escape the grave naked, leaving his linen wrappings behind. Theodore Zahn comments: "Mark paints a small picture of himself in the corner of his work."

After the resurrection, Mark's home continued to be the hub of church life for the apostles (Acts 1:13; 12:12). This was where they held an emergency prayer meeting for Peter, who had been jailed by King Herod. Herod had just executed James, the brother of John, and it looked as if Peter would be next. In a scene filled with first-hand detail and playful humor, the Lord answers the prayers of the apostles. The sleeping Peter is awakened by an angel, who walks him out of prison. The apostle, in a stupor, is not sure whether he's dreaming or having a vision until he's safely outside. When Peter makes his return to the house under the cover of dark-

ness, a servant girl named Rhoda hears him knocking at the gate. Overcome with excitement that it is Peter who is outside, she runs to tell the others but forgets to open the gate, leaving the quaking fugitive outside. Meanwhile, inside the house, the dull disciples refuse to believe the girl, and they continue praying. Peter has to keep pounding on the door to be let in. This is the home Mark grew up in. What an exciting place it must have been!

B. His life of opportunity

Some time later Mark is given a unique opportunity for ministry when he is chosen to accompany Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey. We find the account in Acts 12:

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper (Acts 12:25-13:5).

Mark, who was cousin to Barnabas, was selected by both Paul and his cousin to be their helper. He would be their servant, assisting them by taking care of all the details, working as their travel agent and making whatever arrangements were necessary. In Greek literature, the term helper was used also of one who made the arrangements for funerals.

So we find Mark, a privileged youth, invited to be part of something much bigger than himself. At the critical moment of history he would accompany leaders who were on the cutting edge of the Christian movement. But the opportunity proved short-lived.

II. Mark, the Man: Failed Service

Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13).

Perga of Pamphylia was a swampy area infested with mosquitoes; it was a place where malaria was rampant. As a result, Paul and Barnabas decided to head for the higher country of Psidian Antioch, at an elevation of five thousand feet (where only the most robust of mosquitoes made their home!). But this too presented diffi-

culty—a torturous climb, for instance, the danger of highway robbers, etc. For some reason, Mark abandoned the mission. Why he left his comrades we do not know. Was it fear of robbers, the treacherous conditions of the journey, or the fear of malaria in the swamp-infested region of Perga? Was it the change in relationship between Paul and Barnabas? We simply do not know. What we do know is the disagreement was serious enough to cause a split between Paul and Barnabas on their second missionary journey, as Paul refused to grant Mark a second chance.

The argument is set out in Acts 15:

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had *deserted them* in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord (Acts 15:36-40).

Who was right? Listen to the wise words of Ray Stedman: "To Paul, the mission was more important than the man; to Barnabas, the man was more important than the mission. Each was correct according to his viewpoint and gift, but wrong to split over it." But for Mark came the painful realization that the whirl of life that was going on around him had nothing to do with him or his character. He was being buoyed along on the stream of success by the life and character of others. It was not because of who he was, but because of who he knew and where he grew up.

How painful it must have been for Mark to be labeled a failure and be shunned by the leading apostle of the Christian movement! Yet he could not hide. His own home was still the center for Christian life for Jerusalem. Everywhere he turned, every face he met reminded him of his failure.

What does God do when we come to the painful realization that we are failures? The good news of the gospel is that God does not discard us. Instead, he uses our failure as the gateway to make us his servants.

III. Mark, the Man, Made Servant

A. Embraced by family who believed in him

Barnabas, the one who believed that "the man is more important than the mission," takes Mark back to Cyprus (Acts 15:39), to serve on a smaller scale mission. God doesn't throw away his failed servants. He grants them new opportunities of service on a smaller scale, under the umbrella of acceptance. There is nothing that motivates better than having people believe in you, especially members of your own family.

B. Embraced by an apostle who understood failure

Mark is then given even more privilege and opportunity in his association with Peter. The apostle, a man who well understood the meaning of failure, drew him under his wing and adopted him as his own son (1 Pet 5:13). “Son” was an endearing term used by the rabbis for special pupils whom they desired to pour their lives into. So the young man who had no father is now adopted by a man who longed for sons. Because of these two relationships, Mark is restored to service. He would go on to become a worldwide traveler for the gospel, his journeys taking him to Jerusalem, Cyprus, Turkey, Rome and Egypt.

As we look at this this servant Mark today, four outstanding character traits are especially evident.

IV. The Marks of a True Servant

A. Humility

When Mark is presented with the right opportunity, he goes back to the one who scathingly criticized and rejected him, the apostle Paul, and serves him at the time when he is most vulnerable—during his imprisonment (Col 4:10). Such a visit proved most healing, so much so that, at the end of Paul’s life, in yet another prison, it is Mark whom the apostle deeply longs for and requests to visit him, since “he is useful to me for service” (2 Tim 4:11). What a turnabout! Here is a man given the highest accolade of servant by the very one who once labeled him as unfit for service! It takes great humility to set aside your pride to love and serve the one who initially rejected you, yet it was this humility that birthed a new creativity in Mark.

B. Creativity

Not only did Mark become humble, he also became inventive. As the apostles were aging and dying, and with them their first-hand testimony about Jesus, Mark felt the necessity to preserve the oral teachings of Peter in some kind of written form. Mark had a background in languages. He knew Aramaic, and a little Hebrew, and he could read and write in Latin and Greek, even if his Greek was a bit crude. So he decided to use his languages for the Lord, to be the first to commit to writing the oral traditions about Jesus and his ministry. “The written form is as new as the gospel which it enshrines” (Michael Green). It was Mark who invented this new literary form of the gospel and deposited it for future generations. Papias, one of the earliest church fathers, who lived at the end of the first century, said this of him:

Mark became the interpreter of Peter and he wrote down accurately, but not in order, as much as he remembered of the sayings and doings of Christ. For he was not a hearer or a follower of the Lord, but afterwards, as I said, of Peter, who adapted his teachings to the needs of the moment and did not make an ordered exposition of the sayings of the Lord. And so Mark made no mistake when he thus wrote down some things as he remembered them; for he made it

his especial care to omit nothing of what he heard, and to make no false statement therein.²

This literary accomplishment is all the more noteworthy since Mark was handicapped (“stump-fingered”). Mark’s gospel was held in such high repute that both Matthew and Luke used it as the basis for their longer, more elaborate versions of the gospel. But Mark was the first to set down the account, so we can credit him with the invention of a brand new literary genre, the gospel.

C. Innovative

Mark also is credited by some scholars as being a key figure in the development of the *codex* (Latin for a “bound book”). Up to this time, all writing was done on scrolls. These were large, cumbersome documents which only the elite could afford. But someone came up with the idea of creating a new way of preserving writings in a bound form, using papyrus, held together with a wooden cover. This new book form (the *codex*) made writing more accessible and easier to distribute. It was much used by Christians. Over ninety per cent of the *codex* material which we possess from the second century is Christian. Mark could well have been one of the pioneers in this communications revolution.

We need fresh ways to preserve and share the gospel. Making the same old noises in our post-Christian culture won’t work. We need innovative servants, writers, poets, dramatists, and producers.

D. Adventurousome

Finally, we are told by the later church fathers that when Mark grew older, he went beyond his role as servant and became an evangelist. The fourth century church historian Eusebius said of him: “Mark was the first to be sent to Egypt and proclaimed the gospel he had written, and first established the church in Alexandria.”³ Whether Mark actually went to Alexandria or not we can’t say for sure, but we do know that there was a significant church in that city from a very early date.

I am reminded of our own Jim Foster. Jim never finished high school. He was a servant among us. He fixed our cars, he poured our coffee. He is married now to Nelly, his Romanian bride, and he is ministering in that country as an evangelist, using his languages for God. And in like manner, over the past ten years God has moved seven of our elders to new territories where he had ministries awaiting them.

These then are the characteristics of Mark as God’s servant: humble, creative, innovative and adventuresome.

Michael Green summarizes Mark’s story in these words:

God takes failures and makes them saints. Mark took his second chance. He turned his family pride into love and submission to one who had rejected him; turned his cowardice into courage, and went to pris-

on serve Paul; turned his return home into a new, daring creativity and new literary form; and moving beyond his role as servant, took on the apostolic role itself.

The elders who were introduced from this platform this morning are, in my opinion, servants par excellence. But I must tell you that each man, like Mark, became a servant through the gateway of failure. They have tasted failure either as fathers, husbands, or employees; they have tasted failure in their health and with their families. Some have tasted the bitter fruit of rejection by others in leadership positions. But in every case, like Mark, by the grace of God, someone believed in these men. They embraced us, gave us a second chance, and turned our story too into the gospel story, giving us an opportunity to learn to become servants.

*May God grant us the grace,
that we remain a place
of that Father's touch
and quickened pace
to seek and save
Mark's lost and lonely face
and in that fervent warmth
and holy embrace
restore them
one and all
servant
sons.
Amen.*

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1. I am indebted to Michael Green and his lectures at Regent College on the Gospel of Mark for much of the shape of my sermon.

2. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastic History (H.E.)* 3.39.14, in Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963) 27.

3. Eusebius, *H.E.* 2.16.1



BAPTISM: THAT STRANGE GATE INTO THE KINGDOM

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Mark 1:1-8

Second Message

Brian Morgan

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We were on a family vacation at the north end of Lake Tahoe this summer when President Clinton and Vice President Gore visited to inspect the lake. I was amazed by the amount of work that went into putting on their short visit. Three different divisions of law enforcement had to work together for security purposes. Highways, bike lanes and even hiking trails had to be cordoned off for a week. Air traffic had to be diverted. Huge numbers of servants were harnessed to cook, clean and organize in preparation for the visitors. Protocol had to be staged and rehearsed. I wondered if in the midst of all the hoopla I might catch a glimpse of the President. One morning I looked out from our balcony over the lake and saw two huge marine helicopters coming over the horizon. They landed at the Hyatt Hotel, about six miles away. That was as close as I got to meeting him.

Following Israel's seventy-year exile in Babylon, the nation was told that one day her King would come to meet her. Before his arrival, Israel would have to make preparations to meet him. How different these preparations were than what were put in place for the Lake Tahoe ceremonies. Israel's King sent an entourage of one before him, a man who went around in a camel hair coat announcing the King's imminent arrival. And this servant asked the people to meet him in the strangest place, outside the city, in the desert, with no security agents or press in attendance. According to this messenger, just before the King was introduced, those who wanted to meet him would have to do an odd thing. They would have to go fully clothed for a swim in a muddy river. And this event was anything but exclusive. Tickets were free. But admission was somewhat embarrassing: people would be asked to publicly confess their sins. If this seems a rather strange introduction to God's representative King, we must understand the first century context into which Jesus came; then it will make perfect sense. Hopefully, as we gain this understanding we will get a glimpse of how radical Jesus was for his generation—and for ours, too.

As we come to the first eight verses of our study in the gospel of Mark this morning we will seek to answer four questions. First, what exactly was the gospel (*good news*) for which all Israel had been waiting? Second, who was that strange messenger, John? Third, what did it mean for a first century Jew to leave Jerusalem and go out into that wilderness to be baptized by John? And fourth, what significance does baptism have for us today?

I. The Expectations for the Kingdom of God (1:1)

Mark opens his gospel with the title:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (1:1, NASB)

This first word, *beginning*, harkens back to the first word of the book of Genesis: "In the *beginning*." Immediately we sense we are about to embark on something brand new, an epoch-making event that only God can accomplish. This is the beginning of the good news which all Israel had been waiting for

since they had been exiled to Babylon over four hundred years earlier.

The term "good news" comes from the prophecy of Isaiah (52:7; 60:6; 61:1). The prophet fills it with battle imagery:

**How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace
And brings good news of happiness,
Who announces salvation,
And says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"** (Isaiah 52:7).

Israel's God would be coming to do battle with Israel's enemies. The battle had been fought and won, and now a messenger comes to the capital city announcing the good news that with this victory, Israel's God was reigning as King over the whole earth. Tom Wright,¹ the leading contemporary scholar on Jesus in his first century Jewish context, summarizes in these words what it meant for a Jew in the first century to learn that the "kingdom of God" was about to arrive:

- Israel's exile and estrangement from God was finally over
- a new age was being inaugurated, characterized by the forgiveness of sins
- the gift of God's Spirit would be given to write God's law on the hearts of his people
- God would do battle with Israel's enemies and vindicate her over them
- Israel's temple would be restored and rebuilt
- the God of Israel would then bring his rule to the entire gentile world
- the prophet described all of these things in terms of a whole new creation.

For Mark, opening his book with the announcement that this was the *beginning*² of good news was to proclaim that Israel was standing at the brink of something very large indeed. What John was announcing was the climax of Israel's history, the dawn of a new age. Everything would center around the arrival of Israel's Messiah King, whom Mark identifies as Jesus, God's Son.³ Mark will say that Jesus would fulfill all these things, but in ways the nation of Israel never imagined. Jesus would accomplish all of this in a revolutionary way that transcended all the old categories.

Next, Mark says that this King did not come unannounced. The prophets had said that God would send a *messenger* to prepare the way for his arrival.

II. The Messenger of the Kingdom: John the Baptist (1:2-8)

A. The Prediction of John (1:2-3)

**As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,
"Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,**

**Who will prepare Your way;
The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
'Make ready the way of the Lord,
Make His paths straight.'**"

Mark opens his story of *good news* by quoting Isaiah 40:3 and two other Old Testament texts, Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1, to show that the ministry of John was predicted as a precursor to the arrival of the Messiah. All three texts, woven together by Mark, speak to the theme of Israel's exodus. Exodus 23:20 evokes the memory of Israel's first exodus out of Egypt; Isaiah 40:3 evokes Israel's second exodus out of Babylon; and Malachi 3:1 is a reference to Israel's final exodus into the Messianic Age. The prophets had said that the final salvation would appear in the wilderness. This is why many revolutionary movements were founded out in the desert.

Mark's point is that the time was now at hand. John's appearance in the wilderness signaled that this was the climactic moment of Israel's history. "John is apparently conscious 'of standing at the beginning of the unfolding of the eschatological drama.'"⁴ Therefore, for a Jew to go out to the wilderness to meet John was to anticipate that this indeed was the time. The crucial moment in history had arrived. There would be no second chance.

So John's appearance is the fulfillment of that prophetic voice.

B. The Way of John (1:4)

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

To prepare themselves to meet Israel's King, John asked people to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. The book of Deuteronomy spoke of such a repentance (Heb.: *shuv*) which would end Israel's exile: "So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the Lord your God has banished you, and you **return** (*shuv*) to the Lord your God..., then the Lord your God will **restore** (*shuv*) **you from captivity**" (Deut 30:1-3).

Tom Wright calls this "eschatological repentance." This was what Israel must do if her exile was to come to an end, inaugurating the Messianic Age. What makes this so radical is that John was asking Jews to demonstrate their repentance. He doesn't ask them to take up arms against Rome, like the zealots, or to intensify their efforts at keeping the law, like the Pharisees. No. He is asking them to die, to enter a watery grave—to be baptized! This was a very strange thing to ask of a Jew. Baptism was an initiation rite for proselytes, not for Jews. For a Jew to be baptized implied that being born a Jew no longer counted for anything—as if they were "Gentiles." Baptism meant starting over. A brand new beginning, a new creation was required. People needed, as it were, a second birth of water and spirit (Ezek 36:24-27), which would transport them to Israel's final exodus into the Messianic Age. This is why I do not recommend infant baptism. Children should wait until they are old enough to grasp baptism's radical nature. Being born in a Christian home does not make you a Christian!

Even more radical than the act of baptism was the gift of forgiveness that John was offering Israel. And this gift was being offered outside Jerusalem, far away from the temple, the sacrificial system and the priests. People could partake of it out in the desert! John did not come to reform Judaism, he came to replace it, or better stated, transcend it. For the Jew, going out into the desert to follow John meant placing all his bets that this indeed was the time the prophets had spoken of.

There would be no second chance. All bridges to the past had to be burned. The same is true today when a Jew is baptized—his family holds a funeral service in memory of their lost child.

The same thing happened during the Reformation when the radical nature of baptism was recovered. Some of the disciples of the Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, felt the reformers had not gone far enough. They came to understand that neither the state nor their own families could make the decision for them to become part of the church, so they resolved to be baptized again. In effect, they were doing what John the Baptist had done. These individuals came to be called Anabaptists. They were held in contempt by the Catholic church and the Reformation church, and their blood was spilled throughout Europe. But what these Anabaptists taught became the foundation of our own doctrine of the separation of church and state. They paid with their blood the price of our individual freedom to become part of the church if that is what we desire.

So in these verses we learn that John the Baptist was predicted by the Old Testament prophets, and that his way, the way of repentance, was radical.

Next, we read about John's impact.

C. John's Impact (1:5)

And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

John was a very popular figure. He made a deep impression on everyone, because an authentic prophetic voice had not been heard for four hundred years. The Jews were so weary of centuries of oppression they were eager to take the risk of revolution. And yet, what a scandal John's popularity must have caused among the authorities. Tom Wright calls this the "scandal of *particularity*, (that [the Lord] should act here and now rather than at other times and places); the scandal that this was how the kingdom was coming; the scandal, too, of just who it was that [the Lord] was using, and the methods that he was employing. Like Salieri in Shaffer's *Amadeus*, scandalized that his God should choose the disreputable Mozart as the vehicle for divine music."⁵ "John's magnetism and the mighty impact of his ministry anticipate the greater magnetism and mightier impact of Jesus the coming stronger one and of his ministry, just as John's death will anticipate the death of Jesus."⁶

D. John's Significance: Elijah (1:6)

And John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.

Mark, the gifted story teller, draws the reader closer and closer into this scene. First, we hear the prophet's voice crying out in the wilderness from afar; then we see John in the distance, baptizing people in the river; next we are brought right up to the Jordan to see and hear the people confessing their sins; and finally we are brought face to face with the Baptist. It is as if we too are standing in line to be baptized. We are struck by John's appearance and his clothing. He is clothed in the garb of a prophet. A hairy mantle was the sign of a prophet in Israel (Zech 13:4). This is especially descriptive of Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8), whom the Jews were anticipating would return before the coming of Messiah. Malachi the prophet had predicted this: "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and

smite the land with a curse” (Mal 4:5-6). There is an ancient Jewish prayer that says, “May Elijah the prophet come to us soon; and king Messiah come forth in our days” (Sopherim 19.9).

One of the tasks of a prophet in the Old Testament was to anoint kings. No king in Israel ever ruled without prophetic sanction. David and Saul had their Samuel, Solomon his Nathan, etc. So John has come as the last in the long line of prophets. He would be the one to anoint Israel’s final King Messiah. He is indeed Elijah who will announce Messiah.

D. His Message (1:7-8)

And he was preaching, and saying, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

But what is new, says John, is that this coming King is in a different league than anyone who came before him. So much stronger than John is this one (a reference to this coming one’s ability to deal with Satan, see Mark 3:27), John feels unworthy even to untie the thong of his sandals. “To carry someone’s shoes after him or to take them off his feet was the work of slaves.”⁷ This act was thought to be so demeaning that not even a Hebrew slave was obliged to do it (Exod 21:2). Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: “All services which a slave does for his master a pupil should do for his teacher, with the exception of undoing his shoes” (*b Ket.* 96a).

John was giving the eschatological sacrament, but Jesus actually bestows the eschatological gift of the Spirit,⁸ so that in the new age, that special anointing which was reserved for prophets, priests and kings in the OT will be given to every believer, without measure! (Acts 2:17-18; 1 Pet 2:9-10; 1 John 2:27).

III. What did baptism mean for a first century Jew?

A. John’s way was radical and revolutionary, but costly

Baptism was radical both in what it promised and what it required. It promised that the new age was about to dawn, an age of forgiveness that would transcend the Judaism of old, a new exodus to carry people into the Messianic Age. These are absolutely revolutionary promises. But what was required was equally as demanding. Baptism demanded public admission of one’s depravity, the renunciation of any special status that Judaism afforded, and the legal protection that was provided under Roman law. One who was baptized could not go back. He would be considered an outcast to his family and he would be liable to suffer persecution by the religious authorities.

This is still true today wherever freedom is preached in countries that have a well established state church. Our friends in Romania minister within the Orthodox church. Their calling is to be a light of salvation in that dead, state run church. Some Christians, however, decided to build a new church in Cluj. When we were last there, they told me they had never had a communion service, and they asked me to be the first to hold such a service. I decided that one of the men who accompanied me on the trip should serve. My choice was Marty Brill, a Jew. He would hold the cup and serve believers in a country which had exported all of its Jews to Auschwitz during the Holocaust. In a very moving scene, one by one the entire congregation came up to the platform and took the cup from his hands. I thought of the verse in Zechariah, “In that day ten men will grab the garment of a Jew” (Zech 8:23). I would like to share with you what I wrote after-

wards:

A JEW

Marty’s face,
Marty’s eyes,
A Jew, a son, a poet
alive.
Marty, the Jew,
serving them the sacred riches
to every one, every one,
for time stood still.

He took the bread,
broke his blessing into song,
he lifted the cup,
and sang his shophar strong.

They came they came,
everyone they came,
one by one,
to Zion,
to the broken King,
the outcast Jew.

In a nation,
who with elation,
deported and exported
every one last Jew.

He lifted every face
to that holy sacred place,
and one by one,
one by one,

they looked into the eyes
of the Jew,
and today,
they saw You.

This was the day
ten men
grabbed the garment
of a Jew.

This was David’s dance,
and Marty was our Jew,
and from the balcony,
even Michal beheld what was new.

What a holy time this was for all of us! After we returned home, however, my Romanian friends paid a heavy price for what they had done that day: they were excommunicated from the Orthodox church. My friend Jonathan was made to suffer greatly, because he had identified with me, a brother from the West. He would not give up his freedom in Christ, yet he wanted to remain in the state church and minister to the old guard.

John the Baptist’s way was radical and revolutionary, and yet, by the same token, costly.

B. John’s way was popular yet dangerous

The fact that so many followed John reveals the hunger and expectation of Israel and the bankruptcy of their current forms of religion to deal with evil in the human heart. So they came to be baptized. But the moment they did so they came under the paranoid eye of Rome, for it was in the wilderness that the revolutionary movements started. Whenever a prophet went out into that wilderness to announce freedom,

Rome was quick to meet the threat. During the short reign of Pontius Pilate's procuratorship (AD 26-36), we know of at least seven incidents when the Romans crushed Jewish movements that had any semblance of revolution about them. Identifying with John cost converts their family roots. It could even cost them their very lives. And it did. John the Baptist himself would be the first to be put to death by Herod.

IV. Will you be baptized?

Knowing all this, would you have gone to the wilderness? Would you have paid the price? Would you have gone into that watery grave? Baptism still remains the rite of initiation into the kingdom of God. It still is that strange gate to meet God. The act itself does not save us. Baptism is the public wedding ceremony of believers with the One who bought us, a ceremony that brings him the honor he deserves. The only difference today is that rather than anticipating the new age, baptism celebrates the new age as being already fulfilled. As we descend into the water we identify with Christ in his death, and as we ascend we celebrate being raised with him to newness of life. Baptism today is just as revolutionary and radical as when John introduced it.

But over the centuries baptism has lost this radical edge. In the Catholic church and in mainline Protestant churches it has been relegated to a priestly act for infants, undoing everything that John the Baptist stood for. And in the evangelical church we have ignored baptism and replaced the void with going forward at a meeting. But when we remain faithful to that voice in the wilderness, and submit to that watery grave, for a moment time stands still and all the holiness of the Messianic Age transcends upon us. May it be yours in full measure!

"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

I have a friend, another Mark, who was baptized in Lake Tahoe in the presence of twelve brothers this summer. He would like to come and share with you how this radical event changed his life.

Mark Asplund: It is my privilege to share with you a significant event that occurred in my life this summer. On the shore of Lake Tahoe, with twelve disciples and a rabbi, I stepped into the water and was baptized. I have always been a survivor. I learned how to fight at a very young age. Never once did I turn the other cheek. Born and raised a Catholic, my life appeared simple. Little did I know that the sculpture of my life was cracked, damaged, and I was blind. When I became a Christian four years ago, pieces of my life sculpture began to fall off. Then, I was convinced I was broken. How wrong I was. This was just the beginning of a life's journey. Becoming a Christian opened my eyes and heart to the unconditional love of Jesus Christ. A damaged marriage, the never ending lawsuit, abuse and many other struggles were no match for the work of God. More times than I could count I longed to turn back to a pagan lifestyle. But the love and persistence of my wife, friends, and Jesus Christ helped me through this journey. It wasn't until I was submerged in the icy waters of Lake Tahoe that I finally realized I had been broken. The words for this poem flowed freely onto paper, capturing every moment of my life up to, during, and after my baptism. I did, however, struggle with a title. There was a part of me that wanted to title the poem "Washed Up," but that

wouldn't glorify God. A more appropriate title is

Wonderful Counselor

A journey ventured now four summers past
Molding and shaping a tremendous task
A life so lost I hadn't a clue
Uncensored, outspoken, a longful Jew.

Cornered, I'd face my image in the mirror
Longed to be cleansed by a resistant tear
Lost at sea with no calming tides
Vision refocused, twelve disciples arrive.

Your outstretched hand now guiding me in
Washing away my guilt and sin
A wonderful counselor, a rabbi's embrace
Clutched in holiness, saving grace.

Then you raised me up
An endless grip so tight
Colorizing my life
Beyond restraints of black and white.

Time stood still, a caesura of life
Detailed imagery upon the waters lacking strife
Restoration revealed, could I withstand
Righteously developed by your master plan.

Gideon's trumpet sounding
Amazing Grace at hand
A paradigm of Christ's design
Played out upon the sand.

The eagles soar, fowl appear
Can this be the result of a fallen tear?
A renewed life cleansed, a soul rejoiced
I can't speak, no tone, no voice.

Then I stepped away from the shattered mirror
No longer surrounded by turmoil and fear
Deafen ears to the fighter's bell that summoned me
Beginning a journey on bended knee
Leaving behind a reflection of half the man I used to be.

Mark Asplund, August 1997

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1. See N. T. Wright's excellent work, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

2. "Beginning" is a word that reminds us of the first beginning in Gen 1:1, and prepares us for something brand new, epoch making as only God can do! The mention of the Spirit in verse 8 takes us back to Gen 1:2 with the Spirit of God brooding over the waters ready to create the cosmos. Now it broods over His people for a new creation.

3. "Son of God" in its original context did not necessarily imply "deity." Rather it was a term for Israel's king who was adopted into a "father-son" relationship to God at his anointing. See Psa 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14.

4. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge UP, 1959) 48, quoting Taylor.

5. Wright, 228.

6. Wright, 98.

7. Cranfield, 48.

8. Cranfield, 49.



OUR FIRST GLIMPSE OF JESUS: A LION WITH WINGS

Catalog No. 1104
Mark 1:9-15
Third Message
Brian Morgan
October 26th, 1997

A few weeks ago I celebrated my twenty-fifth class reunion at Stanford University. 1972 was an exciting time to be in school. There was war abroad, revolution at home, two Rose Bowls—and Watergate! What a turbulent time! As part of our reunion celebration we were asked to write a one-page outline, which would be compiled in a book, describing our lives since leaving Stanford. I was eager to learn where my hippie, war-protesting, revolutionary-minded classmates ended up. I wondered what were the things they would value after twenty-five years. I was intrigued to find that not one of them was still fighting for the political revolution they once so vehemently believed in.

Not wanting to lay all my cards on the table, here is what I wrote:

Stanford was in the midst of a revolt. But brooding over the visible chaos, which came like a whirlwind and vanished with the dawn, was an invisible revolution of a deeper kind that seized me and touched me unawares. It was at Stanford, especially during my overseas experience in Europe, that it burned its way into my heart and totally reordered my world. My eyes were opened to see that the greatest things in life are free. Since leaving Stanford, my greatest moments have come from the unexpected and the unplanned, from a sorrow that opens joy, a grief that gifted me life, and a service where I felt deeply drawn as if a privileged guest to perform on a stage much larger than myself. It only takes a few moments on that stage to take your breath away.

That first transcendent moment I was alluding to came on the island of Mykonos, in Greece. After sharing the gospel with a group of students in a disco one evening, I went out into the night air. I walked right up to the sea wall. A full moon reflected off the vibrant Aegean sea. And it happened. The love of Christ descended and filled the very air, so full, it thickened to congeal within my chest. Time stood still and a savory sweetness filled my soul. As I crawled into my sleeping bag underneath that darkened sky and gazing moon, I wondered, was there ever a night like this? From that day on I was a revolutionary. I could not settle for anything else.

In our text today from the gospel of Mark, the writer gives us our first glimpse of Jesus. As we will see, Mark wants to seize us unawares and capture us in awe, as I was captured in my experience in Greece. This encounter is designed by Mark to shape our lives forever, so

that we will settle for nothing less than being revolutionaries in the kingdom of God.

I. The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan (1:9-11)

And it came about in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased" (NASB).

A. An Ordinary Jew

Mark's style is very direct. He is a bottom-line kind of guy who wastes no time getting to the point. Here he details no formalities, no preliminaries, no protocol, no birth narratives, no babe in Bethlehem, no detailed genealogies of Jesus. In his account, Jesus leaps on to the stage fully grown, like the lion, Aslan, in C.S. Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles*, "who suddenly appears from over the sea without warning... 'Aslan was among them though no one had seen him coming.'"¹

At first glance, Jesus appears to be an ordinary Jew. He is just one of the many people standing in line, waiting to be baptized by John for the forgiveness of sin. This fact was somewhat embarrassing to the early church and to the other gospel writers. Perhaps this was why Matthew added the dialogue between Jesus and John, to remove the tension (Matt 3:13-15). But Mark boldly places Jesus right there in line, with no apology. Jesus is awaiting the kingdom of God. Like the others, he is casting in his lot with John, believing that this was indeed the time. Unlike all the others, however, Jesus does not hail from Judea or Jerusalem. He comes from the north, from Galilee, the land of half-breeds, rebels and revolutionaries. His home town is the undistinguished village of Nazareth, which had "no proud history and is never mentioned in the O.T., Josephus, or the Talmud."² So obscure was Nazareth that some even held it in contempt (John 1:46).

B. Anointed by the Spirit

So here we have the report of this ordinary Jew from Galilee being baptized by John. But from this point on in the text everything changes, and we are privileged to view the baptism through the eyes of Jesus. Immediately as he ascends out of the water, the heavens are violently ripped apart, like a curtain. The promised Holy Spirit takes on the appearance of a dove, descending

from heaven through the torn veil, and landing upon him. Then a voice resonates out of heaven, uttering a mere ten words (in Greek), “You are my beloved Son, in you I am well-pleased.”

Suddenly, this baptism of an ordinary Jew is transformed into a holy anointing of cosmic proportions. Not often in Old Testament history is the veil of heaven rent and one is privileged to peer into the heavenlies to hear that wondrous voice, the “sound of many waters.” But here we are so privileged. The circumstance comes in answer to Isaiah’s prayer, “O, that Thou would rend the heavens and come down, That the mountains might quake at Thy presence” (Isa 64:1).

This is what happened on that day when Jesus came to be baptized. The heavens were rent, and God came down in his full presence to anoint Israel’s final King, the One who would take his rule to the ends of the earth. The anointing is not done in symbol with oil, but with the very reality of the Holy Spirit, who is given without measure, just as Isaiah had prophesied,

**Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him** (Isa 11:1-2a).

The image of the dove harkens back to Gen 1:2, when the Spirit was brooding over the watery chaos like a bird (or a dove), awaiting the divine utterance of God’s word to begin the creation of the cosmos. Now it broods over the One who will have it in full measure and dispense it to all who believe, giving birth to the new creation (2 Cor 5:17). The dove could also be an allusion to the days of Noah. Remember the dove returned to the ark with an olive leaf, a sign to Noah that he was about to be rescued from the floodwaters unto a new beginning. So too, this long awaited Messiah will, by the Spirit, rescue us from the even deeper floodwaters of sin and death.

C. Coronated as Servant-King by His Father

After the descent of the Spirit, Jesus hears his Father’s voice saying, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.” “Son.” How I love that title. It conjures up so many things within me. How we long to hear that word as sons. How we long to say it as fathers. Many men grow up never hearing that word of approval. They spend all their lives longing to hear it from the lips of their fathers. These mere three letters contain a sea of significance, enough to drench a longing son with affection: “Son, beloved son.” How astonishing, then, that when we come to Christ, the first thing we hear as we begin our journey is the Father’s word that he is pleased with us, that we are adopted as his sons (both males and females). I do not often recommend books from the pulpit, yet I want to commend a very good book that deals with this issue. It is *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, by Henri Nouwen.³

This voice from heaven holds great significance for Jesus. It drenches him in a sea of love before he even be-

gins to do anything; and it clarifies his identity and mission. The voice directly quotes two significant Hebrew texts, with a possible allusion to a third. The words “You are my son” come from Psalm 2:7, the psalm that was used as the coronation song for kings in Israel. At his coronation, Israel’s king was uniquely adopted by God into a father-son relationship (see 2 Sam 7:14). So the title “Son of God” became a synonym for the term *messiah*, God’s representative king. For hundreds of years, Israel’s throne has been empty, but now Jesus arrives and is crowned King Messiah by his Father at his baptism.

How will this King bring his rule over the whole earth? The second text has the words, “in whom I am well pleased.” This comes from Isaiah 42:1, the first of four songs about Israel’s Suffering Servant; a Servant who will not cry out nor raise his voice in the street; a Servant who will be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; a Servant pierced through for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isa 53:4-5). So we learn that this King must die! A further allusion to his death comes from the term “beloved,” a word taken from Gen 22:2, which evokes the painful memory of Abraham on the occasion when he was commanded by God, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you” (Gen 22:2).

Never before had these themes of Israel’s Messiah and Suffering Servant been put together like this. Straight away Mark is telling us Jesus is Messiah, that he is beloved as an only Son, but that the way of the Messiah is death.

Before we can even catch our breath to take in the implications of all of this, Mark thrusts us forward into another cosmic drama.

II. The Testing of Jesus in the Wilderness (1:12-13)

And immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.

A. Jesus Confronts the Real Enemy

Once Jesus has been anointed by the Spirit and coronated by the Father, the Spirit immediately thrusts him out into the wilderness where he will do battle with Satan. The term “thrust out” is a strong verb. It is used to describe Jesus casting out demons (Mark 1:34, 39). This is a very forceful compulsion of the Spirit upon Jesus which drives him out into that wilderness to do battle, just as Isaiah had prayed: “O, that Thou would rend the heavens and come down...To make Thy name known to Thine adversaries” (Isa 64:1-2).

Like King David of old, who immediately after his se-

cret anointing went out to do battle with Goliath, Jesus is driven into the wilderness for forty days to do battle with Israel's adversary. But notice he does not do battle with the Romans, as Israel would have wished. He deals with the greater adversary, Satan, that mocking, jeering, murdering being in whose grip lay not just Israel but the whole world. In his direct and brief style Mark does not let us in on the temptations of Jesus, only to say that it was a real conflict and the enemy was Satan.

Secondly, notice where the battle takes place: in the wilderness.

B. In the Wilderness.

This wilderness was reminiscent of where Israel spent forty years being tempted following the exodus, and the place where at one point the nation was overcome by serpents (Num 21:6). Jesus is the representative King of the new Israel but, unlike Israel, he will do battle and win. This was the victory that Jesus later describes as "binding the strong man" (Mark 3:27), so that in the rest of Mark's story he can proclaim, "Good news, the kingdom is upon you!" We don't need to go around binding Satan today. That has already been done. Our role is to proceed in the power of the One who has already done it.

The third thing Mark would have us notice, and this is unique to Mark, is that Jesus was with the wild beasts.

C. Among the "wild beasts"

Why would Mark make note of this? This is very significant. The mention of wild beasts evokes a popular text from the prophet Daniel, whose imagery regarding a mysterious "Son of Man" figure became a key designation for Messiah by first century Jews. In chapter 7 of his prophecy, Daniel describes one "like the son of man" who comes through the clouds to heaven to receive from the Ancient of Days dominion and authority over all nations (Dan 7:9-14). The scene just prior to the heavenly vision (7:1-8) relates the account of four wild beasts (a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a fourth described with dreadful devouring power) which threaten to devour Israel, until the Son of Man appears. Now here is a man, a new Adam, out in the terrifying wilderness, yet the wild beasts pose no threat to him. Mark says that Jesus is in his own lion's den but, like Daniel of old, he is protected by angels.

You may say that I am reaching, but to that I say, you are not like a first century Jew who immersed himself in these texts awaiting the Messiah. Your heart is not burning like his, having waited centuries for the Son of Man to appear. All it took was but a word placed in the right context to become a torch to light the fire of memory. Have you noticed how certain words evoke our emotions? If I were to say the words, "Four score," you would immediately know what I was referring to a civil war, to slavery, to a battle. What if I were to say, in 1965, "Berlin Wall"? Those words would evoke memo-

ries of war and holocaust. What if I were to say, "Berlin Wall, 1989"? Once as I was dropping off a certain professor at his home, when he told me where he lived, I said, "Oh yes, in the faculty ghetto." He said to me, "Don't use that word." He was a Jew, of course. For him, "ghetto" evoked images of millions of fellow Jews held captive before being exported to their deaths. So "wild beasts" evoked powerful imagery that ignited first century Jewish passions for freedom from oppression.

In summary, what have we learned about who Jesus is from his baptism and temptations? Jesus is an ordinary Jew, a man, and thus, one who identifies with us. He will go to any lengths to come to where we are and take on our sin. He is the Son of God, Israel's long-expected King, One fully endowed with the Spirit. But rather than destroying his enemies by force, he will be a Servant who will suffer and ultimately be crushed by them. In that way he will defeat the evil one whose grip holds not only Israel but the whole world. He will spare no effort or sacrifice until the task has been completed, and nothing can threaten his rule.

What impact should this first glimpse of Jesus in his baptism and temptation have on us?

III. Our First Glimpse of Jesus

A. Leads us to Worship

Notice that Jesus is passive in both scenes. He doesn't do any mighty acts; he doesn't even speak. Thus we discover what happens when the man, Jesus, is placed on the stage of Israel. The heavens are violently rent; the Spirit descends; heaven and earth embrace; and the Father speaks. Then the Spirit thrusts Jesus into the wilderness, where demons seize upon him, angels minister to him, and threatening beasts of the earth are muted in terror. Everywhere this man goes he becomes the focus of everything: of heaven, of earth, of all Scripture, of angels, of demons and beasts of the field. The whole universe orders itself around this one. This ought to stir us with holy awe. It certainly did Mark. When he tells his story of the good news of Jesus, he places him at the center of every scene, with the exception of two, the beheading of John the Baptist, which foreshadows the death of Jesus, and the escape of the young man from the garden, which foreshadows Jesus' escape from the tomb. Mark shapes his story around Jesus, because Jesus alone is worthy to be worshipped.

If this is what happens to the cosmos when Jesus steps out onto Israel's stage for the first time, what do you expect will happen to you when you invite him in to take up residence? Aslan is not a tame Lion. You can't treat him like some religious genie to serve you in your little holy agendas. No, he is going to draw you into a world much bigger than your own and relentlessly reshape your life around his person. So worship him that way, with him at the center, while all your enemies who used to threaten you are muted, like the beasts of

the field.

B. Gives us a map for our Journey

The powerful words of the Father, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased,” drive the rest of the story. They tell us where we are going and how we will get there. Have you ever hungered for a spiritual map that will show you where you are going? What God has said in heaven about who Jesus is will eventually be said on earth. That’s where the story is going. And it is this story which gives shape to our lives. We are invited into the account from the perspective of the disciples.

It takes some eight chapters, covering about two years, traveling at a feverish pace (Mark uses the word *immediately* some forty-two times) for Peter to make the confession, “You are the Christ, [the Son of the living God]” (8:29). Immediately following this, the disciples arrive at a high mountain, where Jesus is transfigured before them. Present once more is Elijah, together with Moses, and again that heavenly voice speaks, “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him” (9:7). So it takes two years for Peter to comprehend the divine mystery that Jesus is God’s Son. But that is only half the story. The disciples have no idea what Messiah means. It takes the second half of the journey to lead them into the second half of the story, that the Messiah is a Servant who will die. Then the rapid pace slows down; the bulk of the chapters cover the events of a mere week. The closer we get to the cross, the more time slows down, until we arrive at the climax. Then for a moment, everything stops. Time stands still. And Jesus cries out, “*Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?*” (15:34). The crowd mistakenly thinks he is calling for Elijah, and that perhaps Elijah will come and take him down. But Jesus dies, giving up his spirit. And as his spirit returns to heaven, the curtain in the temple is violently rent from top to bottom.

Josephus describes the outer veil of the temple as it appeared since the time of Herod. The veil was a gigantic curtain, eighty feet in height. It was, according to the historian, “a Babylonian tapestry, with embroidery of

blue and fine linen, of scarlet also and purple, wrought with marvelous skill. Nor was this mixture of materials without its mystic meaning: it typified the universe... Portrayed on this tapestry was a panorama of the entire heavens...”—a huge starry sky!

Again we hear a voice crying out, “Son.” But this time the voice comes not from heaven but from earth, from a gentile, a Roman soldier, who cries, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (15:39). He is the first to gaze at the Suffering Servant and say, “King Messiah!” He is the first to put it all together and say everything the Father had said at Jesus’ baptism. How important is this scene! It drives the entire story until God’s words resound on earth. And these words give shape to our story.

It took me five years in my spiritual journey to make the discovery that Jesus was Messiah. It was a rapid-paced adventure in which I felt pulled and drawn into a whirlwind, one filled with miraculous things, with blessings more than I could count. Since then the path has gotten steeper, the pace slower, the transcendence deeper. I buried my son, my daughter, my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law, my father-in-law, and my Jewish papa. But I must say that in my thirty years of following Jesus, I never feel more like a son, drenched in the Father’s love, than when I am privileged to share in his sufferings. How precious are these words to me, “You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased.”

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1. C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* (Puffin/Penguin, 1965) 182, quoted by Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 35.

2. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge UP, 1959) 51.

3. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

4. from David Ulansey in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110:1 (Spring 1991) 123-25.



DAY ONE OF THE REVOLUTION

Catalog No. 1105

Mark 1:14-34

Fourth Message

Brian Morgan

November 2nd, 1997

Eighty years ago this week,¹ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin launched the October Revolution in Russia. In April of the same year, one of Lenin's comrades, Anatoly Lunacharsky, caught Lenin by the train tracks in Zurich as he was about to embark on a sealed train through Germany, back to Russia. Lunacharsky wrote: "In leaving, Lenin was composed and happy. When I looked at him, smiling on the platform of the departing train, I felt that he was filled with some such thought: 'finally, finally, that has arrived for which I was born, for which I was prepared, for which I prepared the entire party, without which our whole life would be merely preparatory and unfinished.'"²

The October Revolution was about to unfold. But, eighty years later, where is Lenin's statue? And what has happened to his revolution?

In our text this morning from the gospel of Mark we find Jesus launching his Messianic revolution. This is an event of unprecedented scale. Jesus has daring plans to reconstruct an entire nation, and go on from there to launch campaigns throughout the world. As we come to this text, questions fill the air. Where will Jesus go? What will he do? Who will join him? What kind of opposition will he face? Will he succeed? By the end of day one Mark will say that Jesus has enlisted his first disciples, secretly invaded enemy territory, subdued the opposition, and safely secured his first beachhead. By day's end, all of Israel is flocking to this new beachhead.

How did Jesus accomplish all of this? Let's see what Mark says.

Introduction to the Revolution (1:14-15)

And after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (NASB).

Mark records that Jesus took up his public ministry after John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod. John's message was radical and revolutionary. It was as dangerous as it was popular. Josephus says of him in his history: "Now, as many flocked to him, for they were greatly moved by hearing his word, Herod, fearing that the great influence John had over the people might lead to some rebellion, thought it far best, by putting him to death to prevent any mischief he might cause."³ But, as other despots have painfully discovered throughout history, you can imprison the messenger, but not the message. John is imprisoned, but his message continues unabated in Jesus, the one whom John came to anoint.

Surprisingly, Jesus takes his message not to Jerusalem, where the air was ramrod stiff with tradition and opposition, but to Galilee by the sea, where the air is fresh and the lungs can breathe deeply. This is still true today. Galilee, a freshwater lake, is fed by the snows of Mt. Hermon. The lake, which is 700 feet below sea level, empties into the Jordan, which in turn flows to the Dead Sea, another 600 feet lower. In Jesus' day, ten major cities surrounded Galilee. The 300 commercial fishing boats that fished the lake supplied fish to much of the Roman Empire. So here on the shores of Galilee Jesus takes up John's message. And he comes with the same razor sharp message, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." God's rule was breaking in upon the nation of Israel. It was the dawn of a new age, and the world would never be the same again.

Verses 16-34 describe what happens on day one of this new revolution. The action takes place in three settings: by the sea, in a synagogue, and in a home.

Verses 16-34 describe what happens on day one of this new revolution. The action takes place in three settings: by the sea, in a synagogue, and in a home.

I. The Calling of Fishermen by the Sea (1:16-20)

And as He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And they immediately left the nets and followed Him. And going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets. And immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him.

A. The call of the fishermen

In Mark's rapidly moving, vivid style, Jesus is walking by the sea of Galilee, by the town of Capernaum. Observing two fishermen casting their nets into the water, he calls them to follow him, saying he will make them "fishers of men." Jesus steps right into their world and summons them not to a system, but to himself. These men had had enough of the rabbinical system. It is important to remember that this was not the first time they had seen Jesus. Matthew records that Jesus left Nazareth, probably when his father Joseph died, and came with his mother and sisters to settle in Capernaum (Matt 4:12-13; Mark 6:3). Also, it is quite possible that James and John were cousins to Jesus. They were related to him through their mother Salome, whom John suggests was sister to Mary (John 19:25).⁴

B. The leaving of occupations and family

So strong is the summons of Jesus and so irresistible his power that these fishermen are immediately moved to leave everything for the kingdom. Their response is immediate, decisive, substantive, and radical. In the first case, they leave their nets (their occupation); in the second, their strong family ties, and the economic impact which that

would entail in their family fishing business.

Why did Jesus call fishermen? And what was about his summons to them to be “fishers of men” that irresistibly drew them to leave all and follow him?

C. The significance of a fisherman

The image of a fisherman fishing for men was used by the prophets (Jer 16:16; Amos 4:2; Hab 1:14-17) as a symbol of judgment, of God sending gentile rulers to sinful Israel in a relentless search for men, dragging them out of the sea with a net, symbolic of their death. But Ezekiel changes the metaphor and gives it a new meaning in the Messianic Age. He receives a vision of living waters coming out of God’s new temple into the desert and sea, causing the new waters to teem with fish. God would send fishermen along the waters, from Engedi to Eneglaim, and “there will be a place for the spreading of nets” (Ezek 47:1-12); they would catch many fish according to their kinds. So Jesus’ call to these fishermen in Galilee announces that that age has now dawned; and the place is teeming with fish according to every nation.

What is the lesson here? Jesus calls us to become part of something much bigger than ourselves. That call first came to me when I was in college. During my sophomore year, I asked my college pastor to teach a Bible study in my fraternity. He said, “No. I’m going to teach you and you will teach it.” The thrill of becoming a “fisher of men” filled my heart. Four men came to Christ that first year. After experiencing that wonder it was not difficult to leave my “nets” and change my course of study from stockbroker to pastor, and then to leave strong family ties of financial support to become a fisher of men. Lately we have been emphasizing how important community is in the church and encouraging all of you to get connected in a home fellowship. Home fellowships are wonderful, safe harbors, but let me encourage you that there is nothing like planting a beachhead in enemy territory. So start one! No training is required.

So the first requirement for revolution is disciples. Without them revolution is impossible.

Now that he has his first four disciples, Jesus launches his opening ministry offensive in the synagogue of Capernaum, on the Sabbath.

II. Teaching in the Synagogue on the Sabbath (1:21-28)

A. Teaching with a new authority (1:21-22)

And they went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. And they were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

The synagogue (the word means “to gather together”) was where the Jews gathered to study the Torah and pray. The institution of the synagogue began with the destruction of the Temple during Israel’s exile in Babylon. Wherever ten Jews were gathered, they could have a synagogue. The institution did not have regular, paid teachers. A lay person ran the place and called on whomever he wished to speak. The normal procedure involved a reading of the Law, accompanied by a parallel reading from the Prophets. Then the ruler of the synagogue called on

someone, oftentimes a visiting rabbi, to comment on the text. Jesus had a reputation as a man with a message, so he was invited to speak. That day, they got more than they bargained for!

That was because Jesus taught with “authority.” He was not like the scribes. When the rabbis taught, their message sounded like our modern legal system. Our courts are dense with layers of precedents and a myriad of human interpretations, which make it difficult to get to the heart of justice. The rabbis quoted the oral tradition, with one rabbi quoting another and another and another, clear back to Moses, until the issue was blurred and buried. It was difficult for any lay person to think his way through the quagmire. Into that scene now comes Jesus, but he fails to quote even one rabbi. Amazingly, he starts with the text, centers it in himself, and then summons his listeners for an immediate response. The people were astonished by his authority.

But then, even more amazing, his authority in word is matched by authority in deed.

B. Casting out demons with authority (1:23-28)

And just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, “What do we have to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!” And Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet, and come out of him!” And throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice, and came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.” And immediately the news about Him went out everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee.

As Jesus’ teaching was a rebuke to the dull, lifeless teaching of the rabbis, so his deeds were a rebuke to the claim of their religion to be able to deal with evil. The fact that there was so much demon possession in Jesus’ day is a revealing commentary on the impotence of Judaism. There was much religion, but no power. Religion was a well rehearsed game. But when Jesus enters the synagogue, fully endowed with the Spirit of God, immediately a confrontation with evil takes place. The demons know who he is, and right away they are threatened, because they were aware of his victory over their arch ruler, Satan, in the desert.

First, Jesus muzzles the demon. Then, with but a word, the demon is thrown out. Everyone witnesses his convulsions, his fierce resistance and struggle, then the loud cry, signalling his defeat. In a moment, the battle is over. Never before had anyone been to a service like this. This incident gave rise to the first debate about Jesus concerning this “new teaching, new authority, that even demons obey.” The news spread around Galilee like wildfire. By the end of day one of his ministry, Jesus has set aside the old order of the synagogue.

Next, Jesus leaves the synagogue and enters Peter’s house, located directly in front of the synagogue, facing the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

III. At Home on the Sabbath (1:29-34)

A. Healing Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31)

And immediately after they had come out of the synagogue, they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever; and immediately they spoke to Him about her. And He came to her and raised her up, taking her by the hand, and the fever left her, and she waited on them.

The foundations of Peter's house can still be seen in Capernaum today, right in front of the synagogue. When the men enter the home, Peter, aware now of the authority that Jesus commands, *immediately* (the word is used eleven times in chapter 1) speaks to him about his mother-in-law who is lying sick with a fever. All it takes is one touch from Jesus ("touch" is a very important word in the gospel of Mark), and the woman is raised up. The fever leaves her and immediately she takes on the role of a servant to wait on them.

B. Healing and casting out demons (1:32-34)

And when evening had come, after the sun had set, they began bringing to Him all who were ill and those who were demon-possessed. And the whole city had gathered at the door. And He healed many who were ill with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and He was not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew who He was.

When word is spread about the authority which Jesus displayed in the synagogue, people start arriving, bringing their sick and their demon-possessed friends. Mark says the whole city "gathered" (the verb comes from the same root as the word "synagogue") by the door. Peter's house has become the new synagogue. And, unlike the building next door, his home is filled life and healing. All of Israel is coming to its doors. The house, which was an octagonal structure, was built with several different foundations. In order to accommodate all the people who were coming, they had to keep knocking down the walls and enlarge the home.

When I was at Stanford University, there was a lot of debate among the religious groups on campus about how much space they needed for their ministries. I told them I didn't want any space. I had a friend who was going to buy a house on campus where we would hold our fellowship meetings. When this man bought the house, he told me he had a contractor waiting at the site who was ready to knock down walls so we could have more room for our Bible studies. I asked the contractor to give us ten more feet of space for the eighty students who came every Tuesday evening for Bible study. Every week, two students volunteered to cook dinner for anyone who was hungry. For three years, that house became our synagogue for healing, life and love.

Here in Capernaum, on the Sabbath day, we are privileged to see the unceasing work of God in Jesus, healing, calling, teaching, cleansing and welcoming all. By the end of day one, how far this revolution has progressed! Jesus has enlisted his key disciples; he has invaded enemy territory; he has confronted the enemy and overpowered him; he has set aside the old order and established a base of operations for the new, where all Israel gathers for healing and life.

IV. Blueprint for Revolution

A. Will you gather a team of commandos?

In the New Testament, there are no one-man ministries. Revolution is not possible without a team of disciples. When you gather a group around you, these become the deepest, most authentic relationships of your life. All the successful revolutions in the kingdom of God have been accomplished by disciples preaching the same truth. As pastors, we never travel alone. We take others with us to share in the ministry of preaching the truth.

B. Will you confront the old order?

Once Jesus has a team, he launches his ministry in the most natural place, the synagogue, where the Jews gathered. But where is the synagogue today? It is any place where people gather, where you are not in control to set the stage and you must be invited to speak. It is in board meetings at work, the classroom at school, in your family gatherings, and sometimes in the church. Being a disciple involves learning to confront, challenge and summon wherever God has placed you. Our job is not to make Christian ghettos, but to confront the world on its own turf.

How do we do that? Notice in the confrontation with evil, Jesus did not use the world's methods. He was not rude or abrasive, and he was invited to speak. Evangelism in the early church was always done appropriately. Though the message was offensive, the methods were not.

Thirdly, notice that after the confrontation, Jesus did not manipulate the response. We shouldn't, either! Let us share the words of Jesus and display his healing life, that's all. Don't lobby for results or manipulate for control. Just go home, but keep the door open!

C. Will you build the new order?

When the Sabbath is officially over, the real ministry begins. My motto in ministry is: "Life begins when the meeting is over." Notice that it happens in the home, not the synagogue. In Mark's gospel, everything that is supposed to happen in the synagogue and the Temple—healing, teaching, cleansing, discipling—occurs in the home. The home is the new synagogue, the center of hospitality. It is the gathering place for strangers and foreigners, the shelter for outcasts and orphans. Notice how important women were in setting the stage for the healing life of Jesus. If Peter's mother-in-law was not made well to serve, how could they open the doors and invite everyone in? That intimate setting of the home can never be replaced by mass meetings. Don't get caught up in so many meetings that you lose the ministry of your home.

One more thing was needed, and that was a cry which would drive this revolution. Every revolution has a battle cry. Lenin's was, "Long live the revolution of workers, soldiers and peasants!" What was Jesus' battle cry?

D. Will you take up the battle cry?

Mark skillfully unites his text with one word which he uses four times. It is the Greek word *aphiemi*, which is translated "leave" or "release." The term is found in Egyptian papyri for the "release" of the water from sluices or canals for the purpose of irrigation. Jeremiah uses the word in Lamentations 3:46 as a metaphor for the water channels of the eyes. It was used for the *release* of a prison-

er once his debts were paid in full. It was used to announce the Year of Jubilee: "You shall thus consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim a *release* through the land to all its inhabitants" (Lev 25:10). And it was used to announce the coming Messianic Age, when One would come who would proclaim *liberty* to captives and freedom to prisoners (Isa 61:1).

Now Jesus comes, and what happens? Four times in the text we hear this term. Each time the beat of the drum is a little louder and more forceful: freedom, freedom, freedom, freedom! People are set free from occupations; they *leave* their nets. They are set free from family obligations; they *leave* their father in the boat. They are set free from sickness; the fever *left* Peter's mother-in-law. And they are set free from demons, which are *not permitted* to speak. The climax to all this comes in Mark 2:5, when Jesus says to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven [released]." This is the Christian battle cry everywhere we go. We can offer this wonderful gift of freedom to every lonely face we encounter. It is the powerful force which has kept the revolution alive for two thousand years. Will you join?

Do you hear the people sing,
Lost in the valley of the night?
It is the music of a people,
Who are climbing to the light.

For the wretched of the earth,
There is a flame that never dies.
Even the darkest night will end,
And the sun will rise.

They will live again in freedom,
In the garden of the Lord,
They will walk behind the plowshare,
They will put away the sword,

The chain will be broken,
And all then will have their reward.

Will you join in our crusade?
Who will be strong and stand with me?
Somewhere beyond the barricade,
Is there a world you long to see,

Do you hear the people sing,
Say do you hear the distant drums;
It is the future that they bring,
When tomorrow comes.

Les Miserables

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1. Using an older version of the calendar, it was called the October Revolution.
2. Sidney Alexander, *Intimate Biography of Marc Chagall* (New York: Paragon House, 1978) 184.
3. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.118.
4. John Wehnam works this out in his book, *The Easter Enigma*. Mark calls her "Salome" (15:40); John, "his mother's sister" (19:25); and Matthew "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (27:56).



THE PAIN OF POPULARITY

Catalog No. 1106

Mark 1:35-45

Fifth Message

Brian Morgan

November 9th, 1997

In our last study in the gospel of Mark we looked at day one of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum. Mark highlighted the explosive authority that Jesus demonstrated in his teaching, his confrontation with demons, and healing the sick. No one in Israel had seen anything like it since the days of Elijah. As a result, in the space of twelve hours our Lord's reputation had spread like wildfire through Galilee. What will happen to the boy carpenter from Nazareth, and what direction will his ministry take now that he has been accorded such popular acclaim?

Would you like to be famous? If you would, know that notoriety is wrought with danger. Fame opens the floodgates to forces that few survive. People come through the gateway of fame as friends, but they can do more damage to you than your enemies. When the United States women won the team medal in gymnastics at the last Olympics, the image of their coach carrying off his wounded hero in his arms had scarcely faded from the screen before a ravenous host of marketing agents were bidding for the lives of these young girls. Fresh bait in a sea of piranhas. I didn't know whether to rejoice or weep over the medal. If you look behind the mask of almost any celebrity today you will see the wounds that have been inflicted from their being used, abused, and in some cases, crucified. Do you want to be famous? Do you think you could survive the constant crush of photographers? The tragic death of Princess Diana demonstrated that society will stop at nothing to use the famous for their own agendas.

There is nothing modern about this phenomenon. In the first century, Jesus' fame exposed him to the same dangers. Everyone wanted a piece of the action; everyone had an agenda. In my opinion, the greatest challenge Jesus faced in his ministry came not from his enemies but from his well meaning friends. How did he survive the applause? How did he stay on course? Our text this morning from the opening chapter of Mark's gospel is made up of two scenes linked by that common theme. In both instances Jesus "goes out" to focus on who he is and why he came. He is confronted by individuals who appear to be his allies, but in their naive goodness they threaten to steer his ship off course. This text had a big impact on Peter (see Acts 6:1-6). It helped the apostle keep the early church focused in a time of crisis. May it have the same impact on us.

I. Escape to the Desert for Prayer (1:35-38)

And in the early morning, while it was still dark,

He arose and went out and departed to a lonely place, and was praying there. And Simon and his companions hunted for Him; and they found Him, and said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You." And He said to them, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also; for that is what I came out for." (NASB)

A. Escape to the desert

Mark has already given us a vivid account of Jesus' exhausting Sabbath day of ministry in Capernaum. Jesus began the day by teaching in the synagogue; next, he cast out a demon; in the afternoon, following his arrival at the home of Peter, the young preacher is called upon to heal Peter's ailing mother-in-law; in the evening, instead of getting much needed rest, he engages multitudes who had invited themselves over, healing more of their sick and casting out demons. What a first day of ministry!

What does Jesus do after a day like that? We need to understand that Jesus was not acting like God, going around doing as he pleased. Jesus was a man through and through. Everything he did he accomplished in complete dependence on the Father, nourished by the Spirit. What he does now is carve out time and space to be alone with his Father. He needed refreshment and time to refocus, just like anyone else.

So he retreats to the *eremos*, the desert. This term is a very significant. In the Bible, the desert is often regarded as the place of divine refreshment following a stressful time. The Hebrew word for desert, *midbar*, means "place of revelation." This was where David fled from Saul to meet with God, and where Elijah withdrew after confronting the priests of Baal. It is the place where Jesus will feed the multitude (Mark 6:31), and it is where the church is taken by God to be nourished by him, in John's apocalyptic vision (Rev 12:6).

The lesson for us is clear: We need uncluttered space and extended quiet to hear the voice of God. These two things were as difficult for Jesus to find as they are for us today. Because of his magnetism, and lest he attract a crowd, Jesus has to steal away while everyone is asleep. Mark, in his vivid, rough style, says it was "early morning, still black out, exceedingly," when Jesus escapes to be alone in the *eremos* to pray. (By contrast, Luke merely says, in 4:42, "when morning came.") If you travel to Galilee, you can still see a cave on the hillside, whose heights have been called *eremos* dating back to AD 385 when they were identified as the location of Jesus' re-

treat.¹ From these heights the entire lake and surrounding villages can be observed. It is quite possible that this was the cave to which Jesus withdrew. Here he prays in solitude, in communion with his Father, and refocuses his ministry—until he is rudely interrupted.

B. Hunted down by the disciples

Jesus is hunted down (the word is used in the Septuagint of pursuing enemies) by his disciples. Peter, who is in the lead, doesn't even knock, but barges into the presence of Jesus, and shouts, "Everyone is looking for you!" Many of us would swallow those words like honey! They bespeak the never-ending applause that reassures us we are loved. Encore! It is the cry that moves us like no other.

C. Remaining focused on the main thing

But Jesus is totally unmoved by that titillating cry. He merely says, "Let us go elsewhere." Prayer has done its work on Jesus. In that dark cave, surrounded by a sea of solitude, he is disconnected from the world's web and is refocused and re-centered in his calling. Jesus is a man with a mission: "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may *preach* there also; for this is what I came out for."

Jesus' primary task is preaching, not healing or deliverance. As important as these are, they are not the main thing. His calling is to go through all of Galilee as an itinerant preacher, announcing that the kingdom of God was near. Healing and deliverance were signs that it was present, but these things were never intended to drive his ministry. His final word, "this is what I came out for," is filled with ambiguity. Does he mean, "this is why I came out to this lonely place"? or, more significantly, "this is why I came out from my Father"?

As an aside, this text gives us insight on how to evaluate modern day healings. I believe that God still does heal today, though not as frequently as in Jesus' day. The healings of Jesus were Messianic in nature, therefore they were more numerous. But even then, they were not the main thing. They pointed to something greater—the arrival of the kingdom of God. It should be no different today. No ministry should be driven by healings. If they are, there is something wrong.

D. The impact on Peter (Acts 6:1-6)

In the book of Acts we learn that it was the memory of Jesus' rebuke to Peter that refocused the apostles to a ministry of "the word of God and prayer" in a time of crisis. In an effort to solve a church dispute among widows, the apostles had been neglecting the word to wait on tables. The memory of this event refocused them. We, too, need to have a clear focus in our fragmented world. Prayer is what will center us on the main thing that God has called us to do (see Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11). We must say no to the good in order to give ourselves to the best.

The next scene depicts Jesus' unwavering tenacity to his primary calling to preach in the wider horizon of

Galilee.

II. Driven Back Out Into the Desert (1:39-45)

And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons. And a leper came to Him, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." And moved with compassion, He stretched out His hand, and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, and He said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news about, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.

Undeterred by Peter's plea to heed popular demand, Jesus leaves Capernaum and enters the wider sphere of "preaching" throughout all the synagogues of Galilee, announcing the kingdom of God, and as the sign of its arrival, casting out demons. From that preaching tour, Mark isolates one incident to again show how difficult it was for Jesus to keep his life's work on course in the face of powerful currents of popularity. Jesus encounters a leper, who is moved by our Lord's reputation to approach him. What an amazing sight this must have been for the disciples, to witness a leper approaching a rabbi.

Leprosy, which always results in death, is a terrible disease. Michael Green observes that it is significant that Jesus "healed" all other diseases; leprosy was the one thing he "cleansed."² Of all diseases, leprosy is the most graphic picture of sin that ravages the soul. Beginning with just with a small spot, the leprosy spreads, desensitizes, then it deforms and defaces. It isolates and separates one from family, work, community, even God. As late as the Middle Ages, 1500 years later, lepers carried a bell everywhere they went. They were forced to cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!"

Leviticus 14 has lengthy sacrificial procedures for a leper who had been cleansed, but there is no record that the priests ever performed this function. The only record of any leper being cleansed concerns the case of a Syrian general named Namaan (Luke 4:27). That is, until the Messianic age. The day was coming when the blind would see, the lame would walk and the lepers would be cleansed (Isa 35:5-6; Ezek 36:25, 33; Luke 7:22). So here at last is that touch of Jesus that goes so deep that every cell is cleansed from the ravages of leprosy. The Messianic age had arrived!

A. The faith of the leper

I will make four observations about this incident.

First, notice the faith of the leper. These often unnamed little people in Mark's gospel serve as foils to the disciples, and they are examples of faith. The man says, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." He had no question about Jesus' ability to cleanse him; he knew he had the power. There was something in Jesus' teaching and miraculous works that gave him the faith to know our Lord had the power to cleanse him. All it would take was Jesus' willingness to do so. It was that faith that healed him.

B. The emotions of Jesus

Second, notice our Lord's emotions, which prompted him to heal the man. Jesus' reaction to leprosy is the first recorded emotion expressed by him in the gospel of Mark. The Greek text gives two different readings. The first is that he was "moved with compassion," or, better stated, "moved to the guts." The more rare but difficult reading is, "being filled with anger, he said, 'I am willing.'" Was Jesus angry about the ravages of leprosy or angry at the devil for disfiguring a man made in the image of God? We can't be sure. What we do know is that Jesus' healing miracles were a statement that he was waging an all-out war against the devil (Luke 13:16). In either case, here in Jesus' action we see the very heart of God. God is not a stoic, a supreme sovereign unmoved by our plight. He is deeply moved to the gut, moved to anger, and he acts: "I am willing." With but a word the leper is cleansed.

Recently I read an article written by a fourth year medical student describing the first emotions he felt in the emergency room. In the E.R. one night, a homeless old man arrived in a drunken stupor, with a cut in his scalp. The student was asked to assist. Here is what he wrote:

I remember how, holding the curved needle at the end of the needle holder, it felt so awkward, like trying to balance a pin between two metal chopsticks... There are moments in your life that change you forever, and, for me, this was just such a moment. I closed my eyes, twisted my hand, then heard a noise. It was a weird sort of scratching sound, the short staccato of a metal tip, first piercing, then puncturing into human skin, and it all took place in one short inhuman moment. The needle was in, then out. [After several nervous attempts he began to relax.] The conversation drifted to gossip and movies. Finally, one of us said something funny, and both of us began to laugh.

But then the laughter stopped. Beneath the white drape surrounding our sewing, I noticed a trickle of water. Suddenly I remembered that there was a human face beneath this drape, and that these were human tears, which coalesced with the blood droplets on the patient's cheeks to form a steady stream of pink fluid. The scalp is weakly enervated at best, and so between this patient's alcohol ingestion and our own local anesthesia injections, how could he be feeling any pain at all? The attending physician stopped

laughing as well, then he injected more lidocaine solution into the remaining edges of the wound. But the man continued to cry, and his crying began to tie a knot in my stomach. My hands started trembling. I wanted to drop my tools and excuse myself but, instead, I took a deep breath, blinked my eyes and continued to place the remaining four sutures. I had won, but I had also lost, and an innocence left me that day I can never regain. Virginity comes in many forms, and each time it's lost, it represents a moment that changes you for a lifetime.³

This is true of all physicians. In order to heal, they have to lose their innocence and repress all feelings. The good news of the gospel, however, is that God never loses his innocence. He never becomes a stoic. He feels everything right in the gut. It is these emotions that make him willing to cleanse, always.

C. The touch by Jesus

Third, Jesus touches the leper. "By His word alone He might have healed the leper," wrote Calvin, "but He applied...the touch of His hand, to express the feeling of compassion."⁴ This was a touch for which the leper had been waiting a lifetime. But even more amazing is the fact that, rather than the leprosy defiling Jesus, Jesus' holiness cleanses the leper! This is deeply significant. With the coming of Jesus we arrive in the Messianic age, when holiness is intensified. The Old Testament has the concept of holy space: a holy land, a holy city, a holy temple, a holy place, and most holy place. Barriers had to be created to protect that holiness from the constant threat of defilement, because if that which was holy came into contact with what was unclean, the holy never made the unclean holy, rather, the unclean made the holy unclean (Hag 2:12-13). But now comes Jesus, the new living temple of God, and his holiness is so powerful that anything he touches is cleansed.

This has tremendous implications for the church. Jesus is launching a campaign to make the whole world holy and everything we come into contact with holy. No longer do we need to erect barriers and hide in holy enclaves to escape the threat of the world. What we can do instead is go into the world and bring that holiness with us. This principle applies even in marriage between a believer and unbeliever. The believer sanctifies the unbeliever; and the children, too, become holy (1 Cor 7:12-14).

D. The command to secrecy

The fourth thing we notice is Jesus' command to secrecy. If he expressed strong emotions before healing the leper, his emotions are even stronger afterwards. In healing this man, Jesus has placed his mission at great risk. Any misinterpretation of this event would have a huge impact on his ability to function. For this reason, Jesus "severely warned him." This is a strong expression of anger or displeasure. It means "to growl, scold, or censure." Today, we would say that Jesus "got in his face." Jesus practically makes the man take a vow of si-

lence all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem. Upon reaching Jerusalem, he was to go to the priests in the temple and present the offering prescribed in Leviticus 14 as a “witness” to them. Once he was healed he had a responsibility to Jesus; he could not just do as he pleased. The leper was to submit his healing to Jesus’ agenda and mission. What a witness this would have been to the priests! They would be forced to research the ancient scrolls, and then perform the prescribed offerings for the first time in Israel’s history. Of course, they would have to ask the man the identity of the one who had healed him. Then would it dawn on them that they were witnessing the Messianic age?

But the story ends in painful irony. Instead of being a witness in Jerusalem, the man becomes a preacher in Galilee (literally: “he began to preach greatly and to spread the word”). Jesus, who had no trouble “casting out” demons, is unable to “cast him out” (v 43) to Jerusalem. Jesus, who is willing and “able” (v 40) to command leprosy to “go away” (v 42), like a faithful servant loses his freedom and is no longer “able” (v 45) to go openly where he pleases, because the leper is unwilling to obey him. The result is that the leper, who once lived on the outside because of his leprosy, now forces Jesus to remain on the outside. Our story ends where it began, in the desert. But now, due to the man’s disobedience, that place of solitude and retreat becomes a bustling city, congested with traffic coming from every direction, for all the wrong reasons. How ironic!

III. One Question: Will you obey?

Do you feel like a leper? Would you like to be cleansed? Then know this: Jesus is willing and able to cleanse you. Your condition of sinfulness moves him deeply. In one touch, that touch of a lifetime, he will

cleanse you. But the question the text leaves us with is this: Once you have been cleansed, will you obey him?

Just as Jesus is refocused by his heavenly Father to preach in scene 1, so he reserves the right to give the leper his focus in scene 2. Jesus did not go about doing as he pleased; he was obedient to his Father. We cannot do as we please, either. We need to obey him and not some other voice, no matter how good it sounds. He reserves the right to make our life a stage for whomsoever he will, and as he directs. But how often we go around, creating our own stage. As we do this, we may report, we may spread the word, but in actuality our independence may have thrust Jesus to the outside of people’s lives and prevented them for years from hearing his message.

Here we see God at his most vulnerable. He risks the whole kingdom on us, and when we disobey, he quietly puts up with all the consequences. This happens again and again. But the good news is, no matter how often it happens, God never loses his innocence. He keeps on cleansing lepers like you and me.

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1. See the outstanding work of Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin, 1992), 36.

2. Special thanks to Michael Green for these thoughts on the nature of leprosy and sin, from his Regent College tapes on *The Gospel of Mark*, 1989. I have depended on his lecture for much of the shape of my sermon.

3. Adam Strassberg, “First Stitch,” *Stanford Magazine* (Stanford Alumni Assoc.) November/December 1997, 86.

4. Quoted by C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1959), 93.



LIFE-PROVOKING CONTROVERSY

Catalog No. 1107

Mark 2:1-12

Sixth Message

Brian Morgan

November 16th, 1997

In the opening chapter of the gospel of Mark we have noted the extraordinary magnetism of Jesus during the initial days of his ministry. His popularity spread like wildfire throughout Galilee and beyond. The rippling effect of his ministry was making waves even as far away as Jerusalem. Jesus' announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God, and the radical reordering of the nation of Israel around himself, made a deep impression on everyone he came in contact with. But the things that were evoking popularity in Galilee provoked controversy and threat in Jerusalem. As a result, a delegation of scribes was sent from the capital to discredit Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Mark describes the escalation of this conflict in five controversial stories, beginning in 2:1 and extending through to 3:6. Each story intensifies the claims and challenges of Jesus. The opposition is so threatened by this that two opposing political parties, the Pharisees and the Herodians, traditional enemies, now plot together as to how they might kill Jesus (3:6). So the cross casts its first shadow in Mark's gospel.

Part of being a disciple of Jesus involves confrontation and controversy. Sometimes this comes as a surprise to young Christians. We take the name of the supreme Peacemaker into our hearts only to discover that when we proclaim him publicly, people react with heated emotion, and instead of bringing peace we stir up controversy. As Christians, we need to be controversial, but we must be careful that it is controversy over the right issues. Oftentimes we can be controversial over the wrong issues, or controversial merely for the sake of being controversial. When we do this we bring damage to the kingdom of God and the world writes us off as narrow minded, dogmatic and divisive.

In the next few weeks I want to look at the true nature of these controversies that surrounded Jesus. What exactly were the issues that provoked such heated opposition to him? And how did he bring these things into the light and respond to them? In the end, we will discover that Jesus did not shun controversy; he entered into it head-on. If there was any question about the lines of demarcation at the beginning of his ministry, they were razor sharp by the end. Jesus always pressed people to make a decision; neutrality was not an option.

Last week we observed how Jesus remained focused on his primary calling of preaching, refusing to be swayed off course by the pressure of popularity. We saw that he left Capernaum for a lengthy preaching

tour throughout Galilee. Today we find him home again in Capernaum.

I. The Faith of Friends (2:1-5)

And when He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. And being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "My child, your sins are forgiven" (NASB).

After Jesus' preaching tour in Galilee, word quickly spread that he was back home in Capernaum. The crowds arrive in such numbers that they fill the house and overflow out the through door. In the midst of them we observe Jesus, "speaking the word to them." What a beautiful sight that must have been! A rabbi with authority in his teaching, yet totally accessible to the crowds, welcoming all into his (or Peter's) home.

As Jesus was speaking, four unnamed men,¹ hearing that he had arrived back in Capernaum, place their lame friend on a *pallet* ("the word denotes a poor man's pallet or mattress"²) and carry him to the house where Jesus is teaching. But by the time they arrive, the place is already so packed that people are spilling out into the street. Sadly, no one makes room for the paralytic. But these men will not be deterred. They make their way up the outside stairs and, calculating exactly where Jesus is standing below, start burrowing through the roof. "The roof was probably formed by beams and rafters across which matting, branches and twigs, covered by earth trodden hard, were laid."³ Looking up through the dust and debris falling all about him, through the newly opened "skylight" actually, Jesus sees the man dangling from the roof, being lowered down by ropes. While others are having their ears tickled by Jesus' teaching, here is a man who is seeking one touch from the Lord—and he won't be denied. Humbly, the man allows himself to be let down in the sight of all, exposing his paralysis and his helplessness for everyone to see. The scene strikingly resembles that of a body being lowered into a tomb.

When access to Jesus is denied through the normal

channels, real friends (four in number, perhaps an allusion to what the “four” newly chosen disciples are supposed to be doing) find another way to break in. If you have faith, you don’t have to get in line or take a number to have Jesus minister to you. Jesus seeing *their* faith (perhaps the faith of all five), gives the lame man more than he sought: he grants him the eternal gift. With deep affection, Jesus says, “My child, your sins are forgiven.” The man received not physical healing, but eternal life, forgiveness⁴ of sin that carries him into the age to come.

This miracle heightens Jesus’ claims beyond the mere offering of signs that the Messianic age was near: He is offering the very reality itself. What a response this must have evoked! Jesus is offering the gift that could only be bestowed by the priests, at the temple, through sacrifice. Now forgiveness of sin is being offered in Galilee, not Jerusalem; in a home, not the temple; by a carpenter, not a priest; and by a mere word, not a sacrifice. Jesus could hardly have been more controversial.

The scribes feel compelled to step in.

II. The Controversy: “Who can forgive sins?” (2:6-7)

But there were some of the scribes sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?”

At this stage in the drama we learn that a delegation of scribes sent from Jerusalem is also present at the meeting. Tom Wright explains that when we understand the claims of Jesus, “we are in a better position to understand why the scribes came down from Jerusalem to discredit Jesus already in Galilee. His whole ministry there was already undermining the absolute claims of their city and the basis for its control, the temple. He was bringing all the temple offered, thereby replacing and making redundant, Israel’s greatest symbol.”⁵

If you observe carefully, you will find that it is the scribes, not the paralytic, who take center stage in the story. The account turns around these men. Unlike the paralytic, they respond not with faith, but with secret reasonings, a critical spirit that subjects everything in life to their rigid interpretations. They reason in their hearts, “Blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but the One, even God?” Their question is utterly orthodox. They make a clear reference to Isaiah: “I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; I will not remember your sins” (Isa 43:25).⁶

Their theology is entirely orthodox. Rightly applied, Jesus’ pronouncement, “My child, your sins are forgiven,” is blasphemy, the penalty for which was death by stoning (Lev 24:15-16). “Blasphemy!” the scribes thought. But did not have the courage to say a word. The debate was carried on in the secrecy of their own hearts.

But it is a dangerous thing to reason in your heart in the presence of Jesus.

III. Bringing Controversy into the Light (2:8-12)

And immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, “Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? (2:8)

The Holy Spirit reveals to Jesus (as a prophet, not God) what the scribes are thinking. Jesus brings their secret debate right out into the open, addressing their question with a question of his own. Verse 9:

“Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’; or to say, ‘Arise, and take up your pallet and walk’? (2:9)

Of course, it would be much easier to offer the man forgiveness, because forgiveness can’t be verified. It’s a harder thing to do, but an easier thing to say. So Jesus continues, verse 10:

“But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the paralytic—“I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home.” And he rose and immediately took up the pallet and went out in the sight of all; so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this.” (2:10-12)

Jesus heats up the controversy. If the claim to “forgive sins” appears blasphemous, what would they think when he called himself the “Son of Man”? “Son of Man” was a popular title applied by first century Jews to Israel’s Messiah. The term comes from the book of Daniel. In a vision, the prophet saw “one like a Son of Man” coming through the clouds to have dominion over the whole earth, one who would deal with Israel’s enemies and establish an eternal kingdom (Dan 7:13-14). Jesus leaves no room for neutrality. He claims to *be* the Son of Man, God’s unique representative who has the authority to forgive sins. Daniel’s prophecy is being fulfilled before the very eyes of his enemies. No wonder there was controversy. Everything which the scribes held dear was being set aside.

And as a sign of Jesus’ authority to forgive sins, he heals the man. It is possible, though we can’t be sure, that the man’s paralysis may have been caused by sin. Not all sickness is due to sin, of course (John 9:2-3), but it is true that sin can cripple. The shame and guilt of our sinful habits can wrap around us with tenacious tentacles that weaken the will and cripple the spirit. That innocent freedom and playful openness which we once exuded is strangled in the grip of shame. Our lives close in. The simple good we wish to do is no longer in our ability to do. Gradually, we become a heavy weight for others to carry. But all it takes is one word from Jesus and the paralytic is set free. The man immediately rises up, takes up the mattress that moments earlier bore his crippled body, and leaves in the presence of all. The crowd, which would not make way for him to enter, has no trouble making room for him to leave. As he ex-

its through the door he hears their cry of amazement ringing in his ears, "We have never seen anything like this."

The miracle has brought the controversy into the light. It forces the scribes to radically reconsider their whole theological system. What tension Jesus created! His claims appear blasphemous, but his life-giving power is undeniable. What can the scribes do? This life-provoking controversy threatens the very fabric of their theology. The lines are drawn, clear as day, and the scribes must choose. They cannot remain neutral. And we cannot remain neutral, either.

IV. Bringing Controversy Into the Light of Today

The controversy continues today. Our story, which brings us right into the center of theology to the very essence of the kingdom of God, raises three questions: Who is Jesus? How do we gain access to him? And, What impact will he have on our lives?

A. Who is Jesus?

Is he a rabbi? Yes. But no rabbi ever taught like this. A prophet like Elijah, with divine intuition and healing powers? Yes. But what prophet claimed the authority to forgive sins? A king? David's heir? Yes. But Jesus pushed his claims beyond all that. He claimed to be the Son of Man, the very One whom Daniel saw in his vision:

**"I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations, and men of every lan-
guage
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed."** (Dan 7:13-14)

Here is a man in heaven, vested with all the authority that belongs to God, the One who will give the kingdom to the saints (Dan 7:18). We aren't allowed to water down this One's claims. And if they are true, then a new age is born. What was once orthodox religion is no longer legitimate. When God moves ahead in history, he expects us to move with him. But a move of this magnitude is very threatening. Israel's exile is over, finished, but so is her temple, her sacrifices and her priests.

When John Calvin, the great sixteenth century reformer, tried to recover these basic Christian doctrines, he became a tremendous threat to the Catholic church. Calvin had a school in Geneva for training pastors and theologians. He knew that the ordination papers for many of the pastors he trained would be their death cer-

tificates. Most of these courageous men were sent to France to work under the name Huguenots, and many of them faced persecution, loss of property, and death. But Calvin would not water down the claims of Christ. Neither should we.

That then was the first controversy: Jesus is the Son of Man and nothing less.

The second controversy surrounds the question, How do we gain access to Jesus?

B. How do we gain access to him?

We do not have to stand in line to gain access to Jesus. There is no need to make a pilgrimage to a holy city. There are no temple steps to ascend, no intermediaries to kneel before, no priests to beg permission of. In fact, there is no protocol to observe whatsoever when we want to gain access to Jesus. Woe to the church when it erects barriers between the sinner and Christ. Over this we dare be controversial! We should tear down such barriers with the same vigor and force which those four men used to tear the roof off Peter's house.

These men transformed Peter's home into a hospital. What a good image this is for the church! I liken the church to a M.A.S.H. unit located behind enemy lines. The job of disciples is to find the wounded, men and women, boys and girls with open sores and perpetual pain, and place them on stretchers and carry them to Jesus. Two things are required for this. First, it takes the hard work and tenacious resolve of friends to peel back the layers of debris that prevent us from seeing Jesus. That may take time. A good counselor or a close friend can do this for us. Sometimes it is a crisis that parts the layers of darkness, permitting us at last to see clearly. The second thing that is required is this: once they have broken through, it takes a willingness on the part of the one who is sick to allow his paralysis to be publicly exposed. Notice that the paralytic allowed himself to be carried, and lowered into the tomb, in the presence of all. Healing occurs in community.

Have you ever been admitted to a hospital? Lying on a gurney, dressed in a paper thin gown that's open all the way down the back, a couple of knots removed from nakedness, can be a humiliating experience. All around you people are busily working, dressed in their uniforms, clipboards in hand, stethoscopes at the ready, but you are lying helpless on your pallet, near naked, exposed before all. But you know that this is the way to health and wholeness again, otherwise you wouldn't be there in the first place. Healing occurs in community.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together*, has a word for us here. He writes:

He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because,

though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!

James says, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed" (5:16). Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother? God is holy and sinless, He is a just judge of evil and the enemy of all disobedience. But a brother is sinful as we are. He knows from his own experience the dark night of secret sin. Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the holy God? But if we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not a real forgiveness? Self-forgiveness can never lead to a breach with sin; this can be accompanied only by the judging and pardoning Word of God itself... Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother. Our brother breaks the circle of self-deception. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light... As the open confession of my sins to a brother insures me against self-deception, so, too, the assurance of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by a brother in the name of God.⁷

We want this church be a safe place for sinners to expose their sins.

C. What does He offer?

And in the dark tomb we find Jesus present in all his power and tenderness. He looks at you, and with a sea of love in his eyes, says, "My child, your sins are forgiv-

en." But be clear about this: forgiveness did not merely restore the relationship between the man and God, it restored his ability to walk. This word "walk" will become a significant metaphor in New Testament theology. Paul picks it up in Romans 6, and says:

Do you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead though the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:3-4).

Once our sins are forgiven we are united with the life of Christ both in his death and resurrection; and the life that raised Christ now inhabits us with the ability to walk in newness of life. The gift of forgiveness frees us from the paralysis of sin once and for all. No habit, no sin, no addiction need maintain its grip on us. No generational sin, no matter how powerful, need be passed down from one generation to the next. Now we are called to rise up, carry our pallet, and walk in newness of life.

This is how believers force a hostile world to face the controversial Christ. Like the early Christians, we do not merely repeat Christ's radical claims, we also in our transparency, like the paralytic in this story, become walking miracles of his healing life.

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1. These unnamed men form part of a group of what some scholars call the "little people" in Mark. They serve as foils to the disciples and examples of faith. See Stephen H. Smith, *A Lion with Wings: A Narrative-Critical Approach to Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 76-80.

2. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge UP, 1959) 97.

3. V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952), quoted by Cranfield, 97.

4. The word "forgiveness" has already been used four times by Mark (1:18, 20, 31, 34), conveying the idea of "giving permission, setting free," etc. This instance marks the climactic usage, the "setting free" from sin.

5. See N. T. Wright's excellent work, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 434-435.

6. See Richard Schnegg, S.J., *Isaiah in the Gospel of Mark, I-VIII* (Biblical Press, 1994) 69-73. Schnegg carries the argument further, into Isaiah 43, to show that the next verses describe a legal debate with God and the princes of Israel, much as Jesus does with the scribes in this text.

7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper San Francisco, 1954) 110 ff.



A FEAST OF CONTROVERSY

Catalog No. 1108

Mark 2:13-17

Seventh Message

Brian Morgan

November 30th, 1997

In our text this morning we come to the second of five controversies from the opening chapters (2:1-3:6) of the gospel of Mark. I have entitled this incident, set out in 2:13-17, "A Feast of Controversy." Let us read the text together:

And He went out again by the seashore; and all the multitude kept coming to Him, and He was teaching them. And as He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax office, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose and followed Him.

And it came about that He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax-gatherers and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax-gatherers, they began saying to His disciples, "With tax-gatherers and sinners he eats?" And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (NASB).

Isaiah prophesied (25:6-10) concerning a banquet which would be held in the Messianic Age, a lavish feast of aged wine and rich foods, with no expense spared, for all peoples. It would be a day of comfort in Jerusalem, a time of unprecedented salvation and victory for the righteous. At the setting of the table, Isaiah cries out,

"Open the gates, that the righteous nation may enter..."

The way of the righteous is smooth;

O Upright One, make the path of the righteous level" (Isa 26:2, 7)

Imagine you are a Jew living in the first century. Your ancestors have endured the terrible captivity of Babylon and you are now awaiting your final deliverance by King Messiah. To prepare for this great event you set yourself apart from the wicked and purify your appetites in anticipation of this banquet. You have even taken the words of Isaiah upon your lips.

"We have waited for You eagerly;

Your name, even Your memory, is the desire of our souls.

At night my soul longs for You,

Indeed, my spirit within me seeks You diligently" (Isa 26:8b-9a).

Now a carpenter arrives from Nazareth claiming to

be the expected Son of Man, God's unique representative on earth, the one who would initiate that great eschatological banquet. But you discover that he eats, not with the righteous in Jerusalem, but with tax collectors in Galilee! Imagine what the tabloids would make of that:

*Itinerant preacher from Galilee,
praised by thousands for miracles,
now caught on camera, eating with the mob!*

It is this kind of controversy that provoked the religious elite from Jerusalem to discredit Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Our text has the same literary structure as the story of the paralytic. Jesus welcomes someone from outside the sacred circle of Israel into the most intimate bonds of fellowship; his action provokes an intense but veiled controversy with Israel's religious leaders; and then, on hearing of their challenge, Jesus brings the controversy out into the light of day and ends it with a word. In the end, Jesus radically redefines Israel, and no one is able to object. Jesus knows who he is. He won't be deterred by any man or institution. This is what made him so controversial and attractive.

I. The call to Levi by the sea (2:13-14)

And He went out again by the seashore; and all the multitude were coming to Him, and He was teaching them. And as He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax office, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose and followed Him.

A. On the way, by the sea

Jesus "went out" again by the sea, the place where he called Simon and Andrew, who unhesitatingly left their nets to follow him. Here we find Jesus, again focused on that which he came to do, teaching the multitudes. Typically, rabbis taught their disciples as they walked along the way. But no rabbi had this large a following. Jesus possesses such magnetism he attracts the entire crowd that overflowed from Peter's house the evening before. Now, by the seashore, they all are in tow, mesmerized by his teaching. They approach a toll crossing, and there is a toll (tax) collector seated inside. Such a large crowd would wake up any customs official. Today would present an opportunity for great financial gain.

B. Politics and the toll-collector

To appreciate the power of this story, we need to understand something of the political background of the

Roman Empire. Judea, which lay to the south, was a Roman province that was ruled by a procurator. Galilee in the north was a client kingdom, a buffer state set up to protect her provinces. The Roman Empire had an extremely oppressive tax structure. Taxes were imposed not only in the imperial provinces but also in so-called "client" kingdoms.

Every aspect of economic life was taxed. Besides levying income taxes, Rome imposed an intricate system of customs on goods in transit between its various provinces. Emil Schürer writes:

The customs were not collected by civil servants, but by lessees, the so-called *publicani*, who leased the customs of a particular district for a fixed annual sum. Whatever the revenue yielded in excess of that sum was their gain...so there was plenty of scope for the arbitrariness and rapacity of the tax-collectors. The exploitation of such opportunities and the not infrequent overcharges made by these officials caused them, as a class, to be loathed by the people. As the poet Herodas had stated it: "every door shudders before the tax-collectors."¹

The tax collectors symbolized foreign domination. They were the hated collaborators of the empire. The rabbis classed them as robbers, since they sold their services to the foreign oppressor, becoming wealthy at their own countrymen's expense. Michael Green notes that "Capernaum was a border town that lay on the great road called the 'Way of the Sea,' that led from Syria to Egypt. As you passed through one territory to the next you would pass a customs booth, and there you would have to pay taxes on goods you were transporting."²

C. The man Levi

Sitting in this booth that day was Levi. Michael Green comments on the irony of a man named Levi living such a life. "He was a living contradiction of his ancestral name. Levi was the Old Testament tribe who were dedicated to serve in the sanctuary. They were to have no possessions; the Lord alone was to be their inheritance. By faith they were to live off the offerings of their countrymen; they were to have no business distractions" (Deut 10:8-9).

But this Levi had forsaken faith for raw materialism. His business had cut him off from the temple; he had not worshipped in years. Here then is a twisted business man, fulfilling the Lord's words in the prophet Malachi regarding corrupt priests who "corrupted the covenant of Levi...So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people" (Mal 2:8-9). But Malachi went on to say that a day was coming when the Lord would suddenly come to his temple and purify the sons of Levi with fire and refine them like gold; then Judah would offer an offering of righteousness (Mal 3:1-4).³

That day that Malachi had spoken of has now arrived! Jesus comes right up to Levi in the toll booth.

Levi asks him, "Do you have anything to declare?" Jesus looks back into his eyes with penetrating force and irresistible love, and says, "Follow me." It is a call "so forceful that Levi...will forsake his occupation right in the middle of pursuing it."⁴ It took not a moment's consideration. "Levi paid his biggest tax of his life that day, and gets the biggest kickback of his life."⁵

On that day by the seashore, Jesus became not only Levi's master but his friend. Levi has no hesitation in inviting him to his house for dinner.

II. A Feast of Controversy (2:15-17)

A. A Messianic feast? (2:15)

And it came about that He was reclining in his house, and many toll-gatherers and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him.

Levi throws a party for Jesus and invites all his own friends, who were either tax collectors or other notorious characters. In the comfort of Levi's home they recline and eat together, a symbol of the sacred bonds of fellowship. Here is a house filled with outcasts, people who because of their occupations could not give witness in Israel. They were not allowed to be judges and were barred from the synagogues, yet Jesus feels so comfortable with them, he reclines with them and eats.

Michael Green comments how backward the church is. What we call "outreach" is really "in-drag." In order to minister to outsiders, we drag people into a place where they don't feel the slightest bit comfortable. The best outreach is to insert Christians into the natural settings where the world gathers and befriend people there.

And notice that as Jesus eats, a transformation occurs. The table, which had been the habitual stage for extortion, greed and bad jokes, is transformed into a holy banquet of messianic followers. Jesus' magnetic power draws people who ordinarily would have little or nothing to do with religion.⁶ And so "many" of them! The word is repeated for emphasis. Think what this dinner cost the treasuries of Rome. Empty toll booths everywhere! People crossing en masse, at no charge! What is so amazing about this is that when Isaiah wrote about the rich banquet feast that would come with the arrival of Messiah, it was the righteous who would be invited (26:2, 7). The feast has arrived, but the guest list had all the wrong people. Thus did this banquet in Levi's house become a feast of controversy.

B. Life provoking controversy (2:16)

And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax-gatherers, they began saying to His disciples, "Why is He eating and drinking with tax-gatherers and sinners?"

The Pharisees, who prided themselves on separation from sinners, have a visceral reaction to this most un-

sual dinner party. They regarded tax collectors as social lepers, so they remained safely outside the party. In the controversy over the paralytic they didn't have the courage to speak a word. Now they speak, but lack the courage to address Jesus directly, and so condemn him in the presence of his disciples. In a highly disparaging tone they voice their incredulity at the sight of the two classes brought together. Notice their exclamation, "With tax-gatherers and sinners he eats?" Jesus' action has left them so repulsed they cannot even bring themselves to utter his name.

C. Bringing controversy to light (2:17)

And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

But Jesus overhears what they are saying. Not waiting for the disciples to relay the information to him, he takes the initiative and brings the controversy out into the light. He answers the Pharisees' question with a well known proverb, "It is not the healthy (lit. *strong*) who need a physician, but those who are sick." Then he forcefully applies that wisdom to their question, saying, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." "Jesus' statement ends the argument almost before it begins. There is no see-sawing. With one verbal blow he knocks out his critics. His word is final, its truth self-evident. He can call sinners. He does call them. Nobody can stop him from doing so, or even make him look bad when he does, ritual laws notwithstanding."⁷

This text leaves us with good news, a rebuke, and a challenge.

III. Will You Join the Party?

A. Good news for modern Levis

What good news this is for modern-day Levis! Likewise for people who were specially named and set apart by their parents, only to blow it; for those who forsook faith for materialism; for those who became successful, but with each rung up the corporate ladder fell into more and more compromise until they lost every vestige of their own identity, save the jaded memory of a name that kept echoing in their ears, reminding them of their heritage. What good news this text is for those cast away (in the name of decency) by the shame they brought upon their families! Was there someone sitting at your Thanksgiving feast who brought shame to your family name? If that someone was you, know that Jesus does not wait to dress you up and drag you into church.

To you, O Levi, the good news is that Jesus steps right into your world. While you sit in your toll booth, fixed at your terminal, he comes to you. He calls you and invites you, not to the fringe of some religious movement but to the very center of his holy kingdom. And the transformation does not come about by dressing you up for church. It comes in the deepest sanctuary of your personal world. He comes to the very center of

your world and dines with all your friends, loving them right where they are.

And, as he did with Levi, he will change your name. Levi, the one who stole from Yahweh, would go on to become Matthew, the gift of Yahweh. He is the same man who so faithfully wrote down the story that we know as *The Gospel According to Matthew*. The fruit of his labors is immeasurable, far outweighing the shame of his former life. So you, O Levi, will become his gift. It is noteworthy that Mark strategically places Jesus' call of Levi immediately after the accounts of the cleansing of the leper and the healing of the paralytic. The transformation of a tax collector to a disciple is nothing short of a miracle. It is the reality of which those miracles were but signs.

Our text resounds with good news, but it also leaves us with a rebuke.

B. A rebuke to the religious

When Jesus first went to the synagogue as a revolutionary, he made a startling impact. Then he went to Peter's home and made that place the new synagogue, with all Israel gathering there. In today's story he goes outside, down by the seashore, and turns Levi's house into the new synagogue. How controversial can he be! The miracle of this story is that Jesus' holiness transformed the home of Levi into a messianic feast. At the center was Jesus, with Levi, and around them tax collectors and sinners who were even then learning to become disciples. But *outside* remained those who refused to enter into God's saving work. They prided themselves on being separate, and insisted on keeping their noses clean.

The text forces us to ask this question of ourselves: To what degree are we Pharisees? Do we pride ourselves in our ability to remain separate? Do we construct thick walls to protect ourselves from the world? Do we put pressure on other believers to attend holy meetings to the exclusion of non-Christian relationships? Do we look with suspicion on Christians who form significant friendships in the world? Are we proud that "we keep our nose clean, but look down on others who get their hands dirty?"⁸

To the degree that we act like Pharisees we are thwarting God's saving work. For this, Jesus would give us no mild rebuke. His actions radically redefine God's people, and his proverb redefines who is in and who is out. If religion merely means that we are separate, and that's all it means, then we are out! The church is not the place where we separate from all that is unclean to remain holy; it is the place where we expose our sickness to become holy. The church is not a monastery; it is an emergency room. The only people allowed in are the sick, and the doctor, and there is only one Doctor. Of course, the irony in this scenario is that everyone is sick! Controversial? Yes, and more than controversial. This story is a huge threat to people who pride themselves on religion and moral ethics.

So this text has both good news and a rebuke for believers.

And third, we are left with a challenge.

C. A challenge to disciples

This is the first time in his gospel that Mark uses the term “disciples” to describes Jesus’ followers. It is used twice (vv 15-16), first, in the context of what they were doing, and second, as a challenge to who they were. This is very significant. A disciple is one who is a learner and follower of Jesus. A modern-day equivalent would be an apprentice. We start to take on the yoke of discipleship not when we attend our first Bible study, or attend a myriad of religious meetings, but when we start imitating Jesus in his invitation to the world; when we take a risk, venturing forth into the dirty world of sinners, entering their natural circles of fellowship, looking them in the eye with love, and calling them to a relationship with Jesus.

I think today of Gus Marwiesh, ministering to his own refugees in Ghana; of those who labor in Juvenile Hall; of a businessman who repeatedly refuses mantels of church leadership that he might remain focused in the world to share Christ with other businessmen; of counselors who offer hope to women with unplanned pregnancies; of a brother who ventured next door and found a group of handicapped men, and, rather than inviting them here, entered their home to lead a Bible study.

The person who has had the greatest influence in this area in my life is my wife. She has always insisted that we go into our children’s world. For years she has been a servant to many, and the result of her service is that we are invited to go places and engage in new friendships which we otherwise would never have experienced. Being shy, I would often feel reluctant to go with her, but I always followed along. One night we were invited to a dinner party through a friendship she had established. While I have had occasion to share Christ in private, one on one conversations at parties, on this evening the hostess learned that I had just returned from the most exciting missions trip of my life, and she called

on me to share with everyone where I had been and why I had gone there. As I spoke, it struck me that the stage I was standing on took six years of my wife’s faithful service to build.

As we approach the Christmas season you probably have more invitations than you can possibly attend to. I would say to you, be selective, and pray that at one of the places you go you will find a Levi, lonely, lost, and waiting.

The first steps are difficult, but once you taste the sweetness, there is no turning back. Your eyes once blurred, myopic, become forever fixed, focused, free; your vision is thrust out beyond the horizon; and your shy separateness that bound your feeble feet is cast to the wind, replaced by wings to take you anywhere.

Where is that place, O Lord?

Where does that lost, lonely Levi reside, awaiting our invitation?

Take us there, O Lord!

Amen.

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1. Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. - A.D. 135)* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973) 1:372-376.

2. Special thanks to Michael Green for this background material on the Roman tax structures, from his lecture series on *The Gospel of Mark*, Regent College, 1989.

3. I am indebted to Michael Green for his thoughts on “The man Levi,” and his observations of the OT background of Malachi and Deuteronomy.

4. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 123.

5. Green.

6. Gundry, 124.

7. Gundry, 126.

8. Green.



FASTING OR FEASTING?

Catalog No. 1109

Mark 2:18-22

Eighth Message

Brian Morgan

December 7th, 1997

Our text this morning from the second chapter of the gospel of Mark features the third of five stories of controversy recorded by Mark in the opening chapters of his gospel. The issue at hand is fasting, and why the disciples of Jesus did not fast. This text has much to say to believers today. Should Christians fast? And what is it that determines when and why we should fast? Jesus' cryptic answer to the questions is filled with Old Testament allusions to a wedding feast, a bridegroom, new garments, and new wine. Mark 2:18-22:

And John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom do not fast, do they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins" (NASB).

I. No Fasting at a Wedding (2:18-20)

A. Fasting as a symbol of exile

In the scene just before this, Jesus created quite a controversy with the Pharisees by eating with sinners at the table of Levi the tax collector, one of his most recent disciples. Jesus' response to the accusation of the Pharisees was that he came to call sinners, not the righteous. Thus was the controversy silenced with but a word. Now the question arises, "Well, given the fact that you claim the right to call sinners and make them disciples, why then don't they behave like disciples?" This is the question the Pharisees put to Jesus, in 2:18:

And John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

A good question, without a doubt. Mark leaves it up in the air as to where the delegation that asked this question hails from, while Matthew records that they were a group of John's disciples (Matt 9:14). Jesus' cryptic answer not only cuts to heart of the reasons behind

fasting, but by capturing an Old Testament metaphor, he makes a revolutionary claim. Verses 19-20:

And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom do not fast, do they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day."

Notice carefully that the issue at hand is not if, but why one should fast. Fasting was practiced both in the Old and the New Testaments alike. But it was not an arbitrary spiritual discipline. In the OT, fasting was practiced as an expression of humility under the hand of God's judgment, and in expectation of his restoration.

The book of Joel provides just such a model for fasting. God had visited the nation with a severe judgment by means of an invasion of locusts, which wiped out the harvest and led to a famine. In response, Joel invites the entire nation to humble themselves and repent by fasting. Listen to the words of the prophet,

**Blow a trumpet in Zion,
Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly,
Gather the people, sanctify the congregation,
Assemble the elders,
Gather the children and the nursing infants.
Let the bridegroom come out of his room
And the bride out of her bridal chamber.
Let the priests, the Lord's ministers,
Weep between the porch and the altar,
And let them say, "Spare Thy people, O Lord,
And do not make Thine inheritance a reproach,
A byword among the nations.
Why should they among the peoples say,
'Where is their God?'"** (Joel 2:15-17)

In response to the nation's repentance, God promised to visit the land with the early and late rains and bring full restoration to Israel. When that happened, the people were to remove their fasting garments, change their countenance and rejoice. Joel 2:23:

**So rejoice, O sons of Zion,
And be glad in the Lord your God;
For He has given you the early rain for your vindication
And He has poured down for the rain,
The early and latter rain as before.**

It is according to this model that the Jews of the first century fasted. Now, though they were back in the land

following the Babylonian captivity, they felt as if they were still in exile, because they were under the cruel domination of the Romans. They were still longing for full restoration. So while the Mosaic Law required fasting once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:1-34), the Pharisees and their disciples fasted weekly, on Mondays and Thursdays, yearning for Israel's restoration. Our Christmas carol well expresses their longings:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God
appear.*

Tom Wright comments on this passage from Mark:

The difference had nothing to do with patterns of religion. It was not that the two fasting groups were concerned with outward observances, while Jesus was concerned only with the inner attitude of the heart...Fasting in this period was not, for Jews, simply an ascetic discipline, part of the general practice of piety. It had to do with Israel's present condition: she was still in exile. More specifically, it had to do with commemorating the destruction of the Temple. Zechariah's promise that the fasts would turn into feasts could come true only when YHWH restored the fortunes of his people.¹

This is what Zechariah says:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth months will become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace'" (Zech 8:19).

How Israel longed for that day! According to Isaiah, that time of complete restoration would bring God infinite joy as well:

**"And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
So your God will rejoice over you"** (Isa 62:5).

B. Rejoicing in the presence of the bridegroom

In his response to the question put to him, Jesus explains that fasting should not be a discipline which believers arbitrarily impose on their bodies in order to cultivate spirituality. Rather, fasting is an inner response to a reality that is much bigger than themselves. Many of you have had the experience of being with a son, a daughter or relative who was near death. I don't know about you, but at times like these I have found it very hard to eat. It is ironic, though, that on such occasions one of the things we are pressed to do is to eat something. But eating at such a time seems almost sacrilegious to the sacred process of grief. The opposite is true of a wedding, however. Then, joy and gladness fill the air with feasting and merriment. That is why Jesus pointedly asks his inquirers, "How is it possible for the wedding guests to fast in the presence of the bridegroom?" His presence makes fasting not only inappropriate, but impossible. (Jesus makes his point doubly emphatic with the double stress of "they are *unable* to do so.")

By his mention of the bridegroom, Jesus implies that they were living in that revolutionary hour, the time of Israel's restoration. The party was going on right now, and the whole nation should be rejoicing. Tom Wright continues,

The party is in full swing, and nobody wants glum faces at a wedding. This is not a piece of "teaching" about "religion" or "morality"; nor is it dissemination of a timeless truth. It is a claim about eschatology [i.e. the study of last things and the age to come]. The time is fulfilled; the exile is over; the bridegroom is at hand. Jesus' acted symbol, feasting rather than fasting, brings into public visibility his controversial claim, that in his work Israel's hope was being realized; more specifically, that in his work the Temple was being rebuilt.²

What a radical, revolutionary claim this is!

C. Fasting in His death

But, Jesus goes on, a time will come when his disciples will fast (i.e. mourn), for the bridegroom will not always be with them: "he will be *taken away*." The word has overtones of being taken away violently. This is a stinging portend of the cross: "By oppression and judgment He was *taken away*" (Isa 53:8). In that hour, his disciples will fast. It was probably for this reason that the disciples of John were fasting, because he had been taken away violently. Thus, for the disciples of Jesus, fasting should be in accordance with what is going on in reality. Thus, in both cases, whether his disciples fast or feast will be determined by what happens to Jesus. His destiny evokes deep responses of joy or grief, because he is the center of their worship. Were he not Messiah, this would be a blasphemous claim.

D. Do you have your wedding invitation?

Your answer to the question, "Are you fasting or feasting?" depends on where the Bridegroom is in your life. Did you know that there is a wedding going on and the Bridegroom is present? Do you see him? Do you possess him? Does he awaken you in the night watches? Joy is the dominant characteristic of Christians in this age of the new covenant, because nothing can separate them from the presence of the Bridegroom. Not suffering, sickness, persecutions, bankruptcy, even death; nothing can separate us from him. Oftentimes such circumstances as these will even enhance the Bridegroom's presence (Acts 16:25). The early church still fasted when they felt it necessary to seek the Bridegroom for guidance, or humility in repentance, but the dominant tenor of the age is that of a wedding feast. Two weeks from now my daughter will be married, and our entire household is caught up in the joy of the wedding plans. Her countenance has softened, her eyes are radiant, her face aglow. How could she fast? As the father of the bride, the one who has to pay for all of this, I suppose I am the only one who should even consider fasting! But there is no fasting, just a lot of feasting going on in our home these days.

Pressing his claims further, Jesus goes on to speak of a tattered garment in need of repair.

II. No Patchwork Garments (2:21)

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results.

A. An old garment

Jesus again stresses what is never done. No one, he says, places a new patch on an old garment to fix a tear; otherwise, when the patch shrinks, the force of the new creates a worse tear in the old. It is interesting to observe that when the Old Testament uses the metaphor of a worn garment, it never describes it as being repaired with patchwork. Worn garments are garments that are simply worn out. The same word is used of the enemies of the Suffering Servant:

**“Behold the Lord God helps Me;
Who is he who condemns Me?
Behold, they will all wear out like a garment”** (Isa 50:9).

The same word is also used of the earth:

**“Lift up your eyes to the sky,
Then look to the earth beneath;
For the sky will vanish like smoke,
And the earth will wear out like a garment...
But My salvation shall be forever”** (Isa 51:6).

Is Jesus saying that Judaism was like a worn-out garment that had served its function well? Is he saying now that the new age has arrived, the old will not be patched up? Is he saying, “No patchwork garments for Israel, its priesthood or temple”? We can’t be certain. However, the word “tear” is the same word used of the temple curtain, which was torn in two from top to bottom at the death of Jesus (see 15:38, although there the verb is used).

B. The new garments for the new age

And Isaiah says that when Messiah comes, he will be clothed with new garments.

**“I will rejoice greatly in the Lord,
My soul will exult in my God;
For He has clothed me with garments of salvation,
He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland”** (Isa 61:10).

If we link the two illustrations together, Jesus is saying that there is a wedding feast in progress, and new garments are to be worn; the old ones will not do. This story had a great impact on the apostles, who used this metaphor of putting on new clothes as the sign that believers belong to Christ:

Rather, *clothe* yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh with regard to its lusts (Rom. 13:14).

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, *clothe* yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Col 3:12).

Christianity is not a patchwork religion, designed to reform people from without. Rather, it is a brand new creation, with new clothes. Just as Adam and Eve needed new clothes to cover their sin and shame, so Christians too are clothed with Christ himself. In the new covenant we are never asked to bring about our own reformation; we are merely invited to put on the person and character of Christ, as a free gift. And as we wear these new clothes we proudly display that the wedding feast with the Messiah is in progress and that we are his guests. And the gift of such garments gives us even more cause to celebrate.

Here Jesus has alluded to a bridegroom, and to the necessity for new garments.

Finally, he speaks of new wine, an image that resonates with joy.

III. New Wineskins for New Wine (2:22)

“And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

A. Wineskins and new wine

In the ancient world, wine was not fermented in bottles, but rather in animal skins. These soft and pliable skins expanded to allow new wine to ferment for a couple of months before it was stored in earthenware jars. New wine was never placed in old wineskins. They were too rigid and stiff and would burst as the new wine fermented, so that both the wine and skins would be lost. New wine was always put into fresh wineskins. It was too powerful to be contained in old skins.

The image of new wine is a powerful metaphor. It was the key symbol for joy, used by the prophets to describe Israel’s restoration. Several Old Testament texts illustrate the joy of that day.

**Then the Lord will be zealous for his land,
And will have pity on His people.
And the Lord will answer and say to His people,
“Behold, I am going to send you grain, *new wine*,
and oil,
And you will be satisfied in full with them;
And I will never again make you a reproach among
the nations”** (Joel 2:18-19).

**“The days are coming,” declares the Lord ,
“when the plowman will overtake the reaper
and the planter by the one treading grapes.
New wine will drip from the mountains
and flow from all the hills”** (Amos 9:13).

**They will come and shout for joy on the heights of
Zion;**

**they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—
the grain, the *new wine* and the oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.
They will be like a well-watered garden,
and they will sorrow no more** (Jer 31:12).

B. New life of the new age

Had that future age of new wine arrived with the coming of Jesus? To that, Jesus gives an emphatic, yes! There was new life at hand, life that the old could not contain. As Ray Stedman said of this passage, “New life needs fresh forms of expression.” This life is so rich and full that all the old forms of Judaism will burst at the seams. Jerusalem could not contain it. Neither could Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome or Spain. As Amos had prophesied, new life dripped from the very mountains.

At our elders meeting last week, two guests came to share with us. One was a retired pastor, Walt McCuisition; the other, a young single woman, Karin Stahl. Walt gave a report on the ministry that he is involved with in Moldova, a tiny country in Eastern Europe, next door to Romania. This retired pastor is not spending his days pursuing leisure. He is bringing presidents of nations to prayer breakfasts. He even has a vision to translate Ray Stedman’s book, *Authentic Christianity*, into Moldovan. Karin Stahl spent two years in Venezuela, working with a compassion ministry, supporting poverty-stricken

children. She then went to Guatemala, and with her gift of faith adopted into her heart the pastor of the local church, the children, and the entire village. Single-handedly she is seeking to raise support for Christian teachers in a school that now has four hundred children. How wonderful it was for us as elders to share the joy of a retired pastor and a young single woman! What is this but new wine, new life that cannot be contained in old wineskins?

Yes, there is a wedding celebration going on. The Bridegroom is present, and he is giving out new garments to all who will come. And there is new wine, flowing as plentiful as water, to all who are invited. That is why we sing at Christmas time,

*Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heav’n and nature sing.*

The Messianic age and the restoration of Israel is here. The question is, will you accept the invitation to the wedding?

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1. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 433.

2. Wright, 433-434.



THE FAMILY OF GOD RECREATED

Catalog No. 1111

Mark 3:7-35

Tenth Message

Brian Morgan

April 19th, 1998

Have you ever wondered why Jesus, a prophet with a message of love, provoked such controversy and opposition while he was on earth? What was so threatening about what he had to say? It was this: Jesus' message was the radical reordering, restructuring, or, to put it even more strongly, recreation of all that was sacred in Israel. The family unit and national identity are two of the most sacred institutions in Israel, and it is these two institutions that Jesus restructures in our text today. It's one thing to teach ethics, but quite another to restructure a nation. One is a lecture, the other a revolution.

In Mark's gospel we pick up our studies once more in the five stories of the controversy between Jesus and the religious rulers of Israel. Early in chapter 3, it is obvious that tensions were escalating all around Jesus. It was time for him to withdraw to the sea for seclusion and safety. Mark 3:7-12:

And Jesus withdrew to the sea with His disciples; and a great multitude from Galilee followed; and also from Judea, and from Jerusalem, and from Idumea, and beyond the Jordan, and the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude heard of all that He was doing and came to Him. And He told His disciples that a boat should stand ready for Him because of the multitude, in order that they might not crowd Him; for He had healed many, with the result that all those who had afflictions pressed about Him in order to touch Him. And whenever the unclean spirits beheld Him, they would fall down before Him and cry out, saying, "You are the Son of God!" And He earnestly warned them not to make Him known.

By this time, Jesus' reputation has spread even to distant regions. So great was his impact, seekers were coming to him not just from Galilee, but Judea and even Jerusalem; and not just from within Israel, but the area beyond the Jordan, even those pagan ports of call, Tyre and Sidon. Every geographical name listed by Mark, with the exception of Idumea, previews where Jesus will visit in the future (7:24, 31; 10:1; 11:11).¹ Could this be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy concerning God's Servant, "The coastlands wait expectantly for His law" (Isa 42:4)?

Is Mark recording a dramatic shift in the life of Israel, from pilgrims pouring into Zion seeking God, to pilgrims streaming to Jesus for his divine touch? Perhaps. The crowds press in around him with the same force as

they once surrounded the Temple. But never, even during the most glorious of feast days in Jerusalem, were rampant evil and widespread sickness so subdued and silenced as they were now, under the feet of the King. Observing the size and force of the multitude, Jesus presses upon his disciples the urgency of an escape route by way of the sea. He asks that a boat stand ready for him so that he might not be constricted by the crowd. What follows is a whole new creation.

A. Jesus creates the new family (the new Israel) on the Mountain (3:13-19)

And He went up to the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons. And He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom He gave the name Peter), and James, the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James (to them He gave the name Boanerges, which means, "Sons of Thunder"); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus, and Simon the Zealot; and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.

Departing the crowd by way of the sea, Jesus goes up to the mountain (symbolic of where heaven and earth meet) and there appoints twelve apostles. The significance of this event cannot be overstated. It is as if the new Exodus has arrived, predicted by Isaiah, with the new Moses, who goes through the sea, up to the mountain and recreates Israel in naming the twelve new patriarchs. And Jesus does this with absolute sovereignty, summoning "those whom He Himself wanted." Israel hadn't had twelve tribes since the Assyrian captivity, in 722 B.C. Restoring the nation was to be the role of God's future Servant, "To raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel" (Isa 49:6). Tom Wright says, "The call of the twelve makes it clear enough; ...his motley group of followers either constitute the real Israel, or they are nothing."²

At first glance, however, these twelve do not look any more promising than the sons of Jacob. The impetuous Peter is their leader and spokesman. There are irreconcilable political passions between Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector. And, just as king David had his sons of Zeruijah, who lived by the motto, "You want it done? Just give me a gun!" so Jesus has his Sons of Thunder, James and John, who are more than willing to

call down fire and brimstone on the enemies of the King. And, of course, the betrayer was in their midst. There's not a lot of promise in this bunch—except for one thing. Jesus summons the twelve to be *with him*, and he sends them out with *his authority*, not theirs, to preach and cast out demons. What a bold move Jesus makes, recreating the nation of Israel around himself!

The rest of the text describes the reaction which Jesus receives, from his own family and from the scribes, to his recreation of the family of God.

B. At home: the family's charge against Jesus (3:20-21)

And He came home, and the multitude gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal. And when His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, "He has lost His senses."

When Jesus returns home to Capernaum, the crowds are so large there is neither time nor place to eat; so his ministry of teaching, healing, and cleansing wounded people goes on unabated. Upon hearing that matters are getting out of control, his own family comes to the opinion that he is out of his mind. They arrive to seize him and put him back into his proper place in the family.

But they are not the only ones who have concerns about what Jesus is doing.

C. The Scribes' charge against Jesus: His alleged relationship to Satan (3:22)

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons."

The scribes come from Jerusalem to judge for themselves. They can't deny the impact Jesus is making, nor can they disclaim the fact that many who were demon possessed had been liberated. They can't deny the power, but they disclaim the source. They charge, "He is possessed by Beelzebul, casting out demons by the ruler of demons." They are claiming Jesus is in league with the devil—in effect, that Beelzebul is the source of his power.

Jesus is quick to answer their allegation with a parable of his own; and then he makes his allegations about who is in league with the devil.

X. Jesus' parable to explain his relationship to Satan (3:23-27)

And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? And if a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished!"

Here we come to the center-piece of our text. Jesus

poses four rhetorical questions to his accusers, each of which points to the utter impossibility of their allegations. How can Satan cast out Satan? he demands. How absurd! A kingdom or house divided against itself it cannot stand. If Satan had risen up against himself, isn't it obvious that he was finished?

Certainly Satan was finished, but for an entirely different reason. Verse 27:

"But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house."

Someone stronger than the strong man has bound Satan. That is why his goods are plundered.

This imagery is an explicit reference to the prophecy of Isaiah 49:24-25. (In fact, all of Mark 3 can be seen as a parallel to Isaiah 49).

**"Can booty be taken away from the *strong man*,
Or can the innocent captive be rescued?"**

But, thus says the Lord,

"Even the captive of the *strong man* shall be taken away,

And *the booty* of the tyrant shall be rescued.

I myself will contend with those who contend with you.

I myself will save your children."

Isaiah was addressing the sons of Israel, who were being held in captivity, exiled under the hand of a strong enemy. How could they ever be rescued? It would take someone stronger than their powerful enemy to restore the booty of the tyrant. In this text, God says he will do it himself: "I myself will save your children." Here Jesus applies the text to himself, saying that now the sons of Israel are captive to a tyrant, the devil, and that he has in fact "bound"³ this strong man, liberating the captives. This is the powerful implication of Jesus' casting out of the demons. The real threat to the family of God has been bound, and the children are free at last. This is why it is ridiculous for people to pray that Satan be "bound." That has already happened.

Next, Jesus puts his accusers on the stand, making a serious allegation of his own.

C'. Charge against the scribes: Their relationship to Satan (3:28-30)

"Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"—because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

Blasphemy is a very serious sin. The name of God is to be honored and protected at all costs. In the Old Testament, this sin was held to be so serious it was considered a capital offense. But, says Jesus, blasphemy and all other sins can be forgiven...but, "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but

is guilty of an eternal sin.”

Far from being in league with the devil, Jesus is claiming to be the bearer of the Holy Spirit, whose power liberates men and women from the power of the devil, as evidenced by his ability to cast out demons. In the face of that clear evidence the scribes were attributing the life-saving work of the Holy Spirit to the devil; and in so doing that were refusing the gift of forgiveness, and coming dangerously close to committing that sin.⁴ For someone to commit this sin today he would have to be persistent in his refusal to heed the Holy Spirit's testimony about Jesus, as evidenced in the Scriptures and in the lives of people whom Jesus liberates from sin and the devil. By so doing such a one would be refusing the very gift of forgiveness itself.

Jesus has skillfully turned the tables on his accusers. Rather than being in league with the devil, he is league with the Holy Spirit, who was holding out living testimony about Jesus, which the scribes refused to heed. It was they, not Jesus, who were revealed as being in league with the devil. Jesus was never one to avoid controversy!

The tension thickens as Jesus' mother and brothers arrive.

B'. Family sends for him but remains outside (3:31-32)

And His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him, and called Him. And a multitude was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, “Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You.”

Feeling that matters have gotten entirely out of hand, Jesus' mother and brothers now arrive on the scene. Notice how careful Mark is to say that they stand “outside.” This is symbolic of the fact that Jesus' own family stands outside the new family of God. Refusing to enter in, they “send” for him (the same verb used of his “sending” the twelve). This act of sending and calling is indicative that they wanted their son and brother to return to his “rightful” place within the old family structure. The question is, will Jesus condescend to family pressure?

A'. Jesus redefines the new family of God (3:33-35)

And answering them, He said, “Who are My mother and My brothers?” And looking about on those who were sitting around Him, He said, “Behold, My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother.”

Upon learning that his mother and brothers are outside looking for him, Jesus puts this question to the crowd: “Who are My mother and My brothers?” Then, gazing at the crowd who had crammed into the home to center their lives around him, he says, “Behold, My mother and My brothers!” In one radical statement (especially in that culture) Jesus has redefined the family of God!

Jesus is saying that this reordering of Israel and the family around himself takes precedence over both old family and national structures; and that the bonds created by his Spirit will be stronger than blood. Do you know how radical this is? The Jews of Jesus' day certainly did.

It is no different today. Rabbi Jacob Neusner, one of the most prolific writers of Judaism in our day, recognized how radical this is. In a recent book entitled *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*, he writes,

What troubles me deeply, therefore, is that if I follow Jesus, I abandon my home and family, but the Torah has conferred upon me sacred duties to home and family-and community too...Can I accommodate myself to his claim to identify a new family, a family formed in response to the fatherhood of God and discipleship to Jesus?...Jesus makes a demand that only God makes...Jesus' link of family to master-disciple-circle forms only the first step, leading...to honor of the master like, or as much as, honor of God...This Israel here is not family and village...This “Israel” is then something other than, different from, that Israel of home and family that I know. And my argument consists in only one “but”...“But, sir, the Israel of home and family is where I am.”⁵

Implications for the family of God

This is good news to those of you who come from families that may have quenched your spirit, or did not value you, or may have controlled or even abused you. Jesus has recreated a new family, one that is large and all embracing: It is the new nation.

There are three implications of belonging to this new family.

A. A family that is free from emotional control

The first implication is freedom. Our text says that Christ has created this new family by overcoming the evil one, binding him, and breaking his bonds over us; and now we relate to Christ. There are no hierarchies in this family. Every member is a brother or sister whose bonds are stronger than blood. And no one in this family can exercise emotional control over you. Old family structures are broken. This doesn't mean we no longer honor our mother and father. Jesus honored his mother even to his last hour, by caring for her in his death. But she was never permitted to direct his ministry, although she tried.

B. A family nurtured by the apostles

Second, everyone in this family is to be nurtured on the teaching of the apostles. They are the ones who are divinely appointed to mediate the life of Christ to us. They are the primary authority for all that we are and all that we do. They are the foundation stones of the church. Once that foundation was laid (with the gift of the New Testament) every generation was to feed on them directly. They are never to be set aside or pre-

empted by later teachers or so called prophets.

C. A family where we are valued

And third, in this family each one is to be uniquely valued. Each one is given a unique gift(s) through his Spirit. And that gift has nothing to do with personality, upbringing, or family background. It is a pure gift of grace, which allows each individual to make a unique contribution within the new family (see 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12; Ephesians 4). Just as Christ broke into the disciples' lives and named them apostles, so we too are gifted.

What a wonderful family to belong to, one in which we are free, we are nurtured and we are valued! But we must be careful to heed the warning in our text, for there is a real threat to this new family.

D. The threat to the family

What was the threat to this new family? Ironically it was the old family, which was morally upright, and in which the different roles had clear definition, within strict family lines. The old family was neat and clean, but it lacked transcendence. Jesus' family was so familiar with him they could not identify the Spirit resting on him. Thus they attempted to restrain this new creation and put Jesus back in his proper place.

If it was difficult for Jesus' family to identify the Spirit resting on him, do you think as parents you are best equipped to identify your children's spiritual gifts? We have to be very careful not to quench the Spirit in our children's lives. If we coerce them into our own molds and narrow dreams of family identity, Jesus says, be careful. Though we may be well intentioned, we may be in league with the devil, quenching the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The physical family is still very important in the kingdom of God, especially in this day when family structures are disintegrating, causing irreparable damage to children. But the point of our text is that a healthy family sees itself as a temporary nurturing place. In such a family children are prepared to help them launch out into the full freedom of adult life, taking their place within the larger body of Christ. And it is in that larger context that full maturity, service and discipleship occur.

When our high schoolers went to Mexicali a couple of weeks ago, every gift of the Spirit was manifest in and through them—preachers, encouragers, prayer warriors, servers, teachers, evangelists, bearers of mercy. The testimony of every student who goes on this outreach trip to Mexico is that it is in that larger context of an-

other country that they begin to discover their spiritual gifts, their value to the body of Christ, and the love of God. Returning home for them is a difficult transition, as it was for Jesus, but at least they got a taste of the new family, this new nation whose embrace is as big as the world.

For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (Eph 3:14-19).

May God grant us the grace to fully enter into this new family. Amen.

Literary Outline

A. Jesus creates the **new family** (the *new Israel*) on the Mountain (3:13-19)

B. The **family's** charge against Jesus (3:20-21)

C. **Charge** by the scribes against Jesus—His alleged relationship to **Satan** (3:22)

X. Jesus' parable to explain his relationship to Satan (3:23-27)

C'. **Charge** against the scribes—their relationship to **Satan** (3:28-30)

B'. **Family sends** for him but remains *outside* (3:31-32)

A'. Jesus redefines the **new family** of God (3:33-35)

1. Stephen Smith makes this point in his book, *A Lion With Wings: A Narrative-Critical Approach to Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 157.

2. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 444.

3. *binds*: this is the same word found in Revelation 20:2 to describe Satan being "bound" for 1000 years.

4. Notice this is not a one time action, for the verb is imperfect, "they were saying he has an evil spirit," implying habitual action.

5. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi talks with Jesus: an Intermillennial, Interfaith exchange* (New York: Image Books, 1994) 44-57.



STORIES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

Catalog No. 1112
 Mark 4:1-20
 Eleventh Message
 Brian Morgan
 April 26th, 1998

The fourth chapter of the gospel of Mark introduces a dramatic shift in the ministry of Jesus. Opposition toward him has escalated and stiffened. Our text last week (3:20-35) formed the capstone to the controversy between him and the religious authorities. By now, Israel's leaders had totally rejected him by attributing his saving work of casting out demons to Beelzebul, the chief ruler of demons. What will he do now that the die of the opposition is cast? How do you respond when you share the gospel with people you love and they are firmly entrenched against it and actively oppose it? Jesus' response is very instructive.

Let us look at what Mark says happened. Chapter 4, verses 1-2:

And He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very great multitude gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land. And He was teaching them many things in parables,

Jesus responds to the opposition by changing both the arena and the method of his teaching. He leaves the synagogue and goes out into the open air to teach. His pulpit is a boat. Perhaps it will serve as a vehicle of escape, too. But, more importantly, the water's surface will amplify his voice in the face of the surrounding hills, which created a natural amphitheater. Bargil Pixner explains, "The bay lies halfway between Tabgha and Capernaum. The land slopes down like a Roman theater around the bay. Even today, this natural formation possesses astonishing acoustics, which have been scientifically investigated by the Israelis. It has been proven that Jesus' voice could have carried effortlessly from the floating pulpit to a crowd of several thousand people on the shore."¹ Rejection has placed Jesus outside the synagogue, yes, but it has opened up an even wider sphere of ministry. In the 1700's, George Whitefield, England's greatest preacher, was banned from many of the established churches in both England and America. He, too, took to the open air, and revival followed in the open fields of both countries.²

Secondly, in the face of opposition, Jesus not only changes his arena of teaching, he also changes his method. He now begins to teach in parables. What he started to do in the last controversy story (3:23) now becomes his standard practice. As a student of the Scriptures, I have always wondered why Jesus taught in parables. They are difficult to interpret. They seem terse, cryptic, and densely packed with mystery. I have never been

satisfied with popular interpretations, which explained them as mere "timeless illustrations of eternal truths," or single-point sermons set in ancient metaphor. In our Lord's ministry, parables had a much greater purpose than mere illustration. According to Mark, they had a very specific context: they were the direct response of Jesus to rejection and life threatening opposition by the leadership in Israel. "Parables flow directly out of the open repudiation of his exorcisms by the Jerusalem Scribes" (Rikki Watts).

In recent years, there has been a wealth of scholarship in the field of parables.³ I have been greatly helped by several New Testament scholars. I believe they have unearthed the original intention and impact of parables. This morning, from the fruit of their research, I want to give you a number of basic keys to interpreting the parables. We will examine the first of four, the account of the sower and his seed.

Our text has three parts: First, the parable of the sower; second, the explanation of the mystery of the parable; and third, its interpretation.

The parable of the sower (4:2-9)

And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, "Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; and it came about that as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. And other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. And other seeds fell into the good soil and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Upon first reading, this little story seems absolutely harmless. It speaks of a familiar agricultural scene. In fact, every element of the account was in direct view of its hearers as they took their seats in this natural amphitheater on the north shores of Galilee. As the crowd listens intently to the words of Jesus while he commands them (the word "hear" frames the parable), doesn't it seem odd that the parable does not contain one word of theology, not one quote from the Torah, no prophetic

oracle of judgment, not even an ounce of controversy? Who would take issue with nature, which in absolute silence grants a sower's seed four radically different destinies, based on the quality of the soil into which it is sown? This kind of thing happens all the time. What is this but simple farm talk? And what kind of response is this by Jesus in the face of allegations that he is possessed by Beelzebub? This is like using a children's story for a closing statement in a law court.

A story can be a very powerful thing, however. When at last they are in seclusion, away from the crowd, Jesus reveals to his followers the divine secrets of the parable.

The purpose of parables: To reveal and to conceal (4:10-12)

And as soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables, in order that while seeing, they may see and not perceive; and while hearing, they may hear and not understand lest they return and be forgiven."

After Jesus has shared the parables from the boat, he withdraws from public view. Then his followers and the twelve begin to question him about the "why?" of the parables. Jesus explains that their purpose is to make a clear distinction between those who are *inside* and those who are *outside* of the kingdom. Moses had written, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (Deut 29:29). Now Jesus redefines who the *true* children are. He quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10, the occasion when the prophet received his commission. At first glance, this text seems to speak of harsh and arbitrary predestination. Why would God have a prophet preach for the purpose of blinding, confusing, and hardening? A closer look at the context of this passage, however, reveals a very different picture. Rikki Watts explains:

In Isaiah, God holds court with his people (2:13), and complains as their Father against his rebellious sons that they fully lack understanding. He invites them to "reason together" with him, offering salvation if they but repent. The offer, however, seems to fall on deaf ears. The Lord laments the faithlessness of his people, especially the rebellion of its rulers, concluding in verses 1:24-31 with an avowal to purge the city and "separate between the righteous and the wicked."

The constant theme in the midst of these allegations is Israel's idolatry, choosing idols that are blind and deaf over the living God. In response, Yahweh, their maker, will now confirm them in their decision by recreating them, as it were, in the image of the gods they have chosen. So Isaiah's preaching is "to make the heart of this people fat, their ears heavy, and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and turn and be healed." That this blinding and

deafening is an ironic judgment upon the nation's idolatrous condition appears confirmed when her salvation, characterized by restoration of sight, hearing, and understanding, involves a concurrent rejection of idols.

This very same judicial response is now happening through Jesus, to leaders who have already refused the message, and now confirms them in their logic and consigns them to the consequences of their choices.⁴

The parables serve the dual purpose of hardening hearts that are already hard, while at the same time revealing the mystery of the kingdom to those on the inside. Thus, the parable was an ingenious method of disclosing a message that was extremely subversive and dangerous. "Israel's history is moving towards its climax, but it is not happening the way it was expected" (Tom Wright). Jesus is doing nothing less than replacing Israel's world view and its nationalistic hopes and dreams. This truth had to be veiled; if it was stated plainly, a riot would have resulted.

How then does the parable draw the hearers to listen? The answer is, through stories and images that were familiar to Israel. The stories told by Jesus drew his hearers into a world familiar to them; then, once they were captivated by the familiar, Jesus added surprising new twists at the end. His parables were designed to break open and then shatter the prevailing world view, replacing it with a new one. In this sense, these stories articulated a new way of understanding the fulfillment of Israel's hope in Jesus. Thus they were essentially secretive and subversive. "In his use parables Jesus was not a 'universal teacher' of timeless truths, but the originator of a movement which was to grow like an unobserved seed turning into a plant before anyone had realized."⁵

Such an artful presentation of truth is badly needed today. Oftentimes when we encounter rejection of the gospel by a family member, colleague, or friend, we become defensive and insist on repeating the same old dogmas, only with more volume or emotion. But this merely serves to drive the hearer even farther from both the message and the messenger. Truth is precious. Jesus did not cast his pearls before swine. Instead, he taught in parables.

Now that Jesus has explained the nature and necessity of parables, he interprets the parable of the sower.

The interpretation of the sower (4:13-20)

And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? And how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. And in a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places,

who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, and the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it, and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

What familiar imagery is Jesus alluding to as he draws his followers into this parable? Again, the answer comes from Isaiah. In 55:10-13, the prophet foretells a coming Messianic age in which God’s word will be like seed abundantly sown in the earth, establishing a whole new creation in the process:

**For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth,
And making it bear and sprout,
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;
So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire,
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.
For you shall go out with joy,
And be led forth with peace;
The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you,
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.**

Borrowing this image, Jesus declares that that new age has arrived in himself. He is the faithful sower, bearing that bag of seed, teaching wherever he goes. He is the word from God, divinely powerful, and that word once sown will not return empty. But now the image of an abundant harvest is qualified. The seeds that are sown bear different results, resulting in four different destinies. But, according to Jesus, the reason is not because the seed lacks power. No. It is due to the condition of the soil in present day Israel.

In one case, Satan, like a swift raven, snatches the seed off the hard ground. This may be a veiled reference to the scribes, who accused Jesus of being in league with the devil. In another case, the seed is sown in soil that lacked depth. A thin layer of topsoil lay upon the rocky shelf, and as the sun heats the soil, the seed sprouts immediately. Some people receive the word with joy, but they are rootless. When affliction and persecution strike, they fall away. Jesus was never impressed with people’s initial emotional responses. What counts is deep roots that endure. Then there are those among whom seed was scattered. They heard and re-

sponded, yet the worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choked the word. It had fallen among thorns. That was how Jeremiah described rebellious Israel in his own day: “This is what the Lord says to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem, ‘Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns’” (Jer 4:3). Anyone with a sensitive ear would understand that Jesus was equating Israel’s current leadership with those of Jeremiah’s day, whose hardened hearts and persistent idolatry led them off to exile on Babylon.

So far, things are looking fairly bleak for this farmer. But then there is the good soil which receives the seed. Deep, rich, and fertile, the soil receives the seed, which becomes well rooted, and bears bear fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. One out of the four hearers is truly lasting. But what fertility: bearing fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold! In contrast to the other hearers, “the good hearers welcome the word immediately, so that Satan cannot snatch it away. They welcome it deeply, so that persecutions cannot induce them to apostatized. They welcome it exclusively, so that other concerns do not stifle it...And by its abundance, the threefold success of thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold more than cancels out the threefold failure of the seeds that fell on bad soil.”⁶ Jesus’ vision for the kingdom of God looks far past initial responses and the threefold failure, to the faithful remnant.

Thus was our first parable very instructive to the disciples, and so it should be to us.

Implications of the parable of the sower

A. Humility of spirit

The first impact of this parable on the disciples was to endow them with a deep sense of humility. Why were they chosen to be given the mysteries of the kingdom, when the rest of Israel was blinded and hardened through disobedience? Why were they chosen when, in fact, they were just as blind, and it would take a divine miracle for them to see? (Mark 8:22-26). This was a gift of pure grace. And so it is with us. These parables ought to capture us in awe and wonder that we were chosen to be the recipients of such divine grace, especially when we learn of the terrible judgment of those who refused to see. Why are we so blessed with sight?

B. Confidence in the word of God

The second thing this parable did for the disciples was to elicit in them confidence and outrageous optimism. A huge bag of seed had fallen from heaven and it would not return to God empty, without accomplishing what he desired. A seed once embedded in the soil can crack the hardest stone when it sprouts. The sowing of this seed into the earth would create a new cosmos so that, as Isaiah wrote,

**“The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you,
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands,
Instead of the thornbush the cypress will come up;**

And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up”
(Isa 55:12-13).

Wherever we find Jesus in the gospel of Mark he is teaching the word. The apostles followed his example, and so should we. Our task is to follow in the footsteps of the sower, casting seed faithfully and methodically wherever we go. The thing that motivates us to share it is that we know its power. Woe to us if we fail to expound the word and replace it with the tarnished opinions or anemic homilies of men!

C. Realistic Expectations

The third thing this parable did for the disciples was equip them with realistic expectations. The word is powerful beyond human comprehension. It is the key to the new creation. But the establishment of this new creation is not without resistance. The New Exodus may not be quite the “occasion of unalloyed joy” (Watts), but failure of result is not due to any lack of power inherent in the word, but, rather, to the condition of the soil. And, just as Jesus sowed within the context of a rebellious, idolatrous nation, so too do we. We live in a world where there is a ravenous enemy, the devil; where there is rampant worldliness in the deceitfulness of riches; and where the flesh resides in every human heart. Though to the human eye rejection may be the prevailing pattern, the future is not governed by the those who reject the seed, but by the faithful, who are fruitful beyond number. May God grant us the faith to keep our vision focused on the faithful, since they hold the future. Amen.

1 See Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee, according to the fifth gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishers, 1992) 41.

2 The best treatment on Whitefield is the outstanding two volume work by Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (Westchester, Ill.: Cornerstone Books, 1970).

3 Tom Wright has provided the theological context in his book *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress); Ken Bailey, the cultural context, in *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); and Rikk E. Watts, the Isaianic background to the parables here in Mark, in his book, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

4 Watts, 191-208.

5 I am indebted to Tom Wright for the thoughts of this entire paragraph, whether paraphrased or directly quoted.

6 Robert Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 207.

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A LAMP AND A MEASURE

Catalog No. 1113
 Mark 4:21-25
 Twelfth Message
 Brian Morgan
 May 3rd, 1998

In our studies in the gospel of Mark, we are the place in Jesus' ministry when the leadership of Israel has stiffened and fixed themselves in dead opposition to Jesus. At this critical juncture, Mark records that Jesus makes a dramatic shift in both the arena and the method of his teaching. He departs the traditional location of the synagogue for the open air, and forsakes the open announcement and proclamation of the kingdom for the more cryptic metaphor of the parable.

His reason for taking these actions is clear. Everyone in Israel welcomed the announcement of the kingdom of God, the great age when the exile would end, Israel would be vindicated from her enemies, the temple would be rebuilt, the law internalized in the hearts of the people, and all nations would stream to Zion. Yes, everyone was eager to behold the dawning of the kingdom. Why, then, the controversy? The dispute arose over the way Jesus taught that the kingdom was coming. This was what aroused controversy, anger, and even violence. But, undaunted, Jesus refused to do it any other way.

Tom Wright explains why:

Jesus was not underwriting any one else's ambitions; in fact, far from it, he was challenging them. He would come to rescue his people, not in a blaze of triumphant glory, but in the sowing of seed, the long-promised prophetic "word." This plan of judgment and mercy was to be put into operation, not through the Herodian dynasty, nor through the Pharisaic movement, nor through high priestly activity in the Temple, nor yet in the plottings of holy revolutionaries, but in Jesus' own proclamation and activity.¹

This kingdom would not be inaugurated through sword, politics or ceremonial ritual, but with a farmer's bag of seed! This image of the seed comes from the book of Isaiah. The prophet envisioned a time when Israel would go through a devastating judgment. The land would be left desolate, like a forest burned to the ground. But then there would come a time of mercy:

**"Yet there will be a tenth portion in it,
 and it will again be subject to burning,
 Like a terebinth or an oak
 Whose stump remains when it is felled.
 The holy seed is its stump"** (Isa 6:13).

**"Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
 and a branch from his roots will bear fruit"** (Isa 11:1).

It is not without significance that these parables in Mark's gospel all focus around the word *seed*, which is used twelve times (the number of the tribes of Israel) in chapter 4. This seed would give birth to a new nation.² Knowing the way of the seed, then, is to know the way of the kingdom and how it grows. There is nothing more important to the church today. Great damage is done by well meaning Christians who are eager to advance the kingdom, but they attempt to do this the wrong way.

In the first parable, that of the sower and his seed, Jesus explained that the inauguration of the kingdom would not look promising at first. Much seed would be snatched away by an enemy. Other seed would be scorched and left without root, or choked by worldly pleasures. However, the fertility granted those who did responded positively would far outweigh the initial rejection. The eye of faith would look past that rejection to the fertile fields of the remnant, knowing that the future lay with them.

The next two parables, concerning the lamp and the measure, are addressed by Jesus solely to his disciples. This is what would give them the tools to enter into the parables. It is the critical stopping point before they go on. No more can be given them until they pass through this gateway. When they acquired the necessary tools, what was concealed in the parables and hidden from others would be readily available to them. These stories would give them eyes to see the way of the kingdom of God, present, right before their eyes.

Teaching this truth is one of my passions as a pastor. Christians often regard their lives as ordinary and routine, punctuated now and then by bouts of affliction and inconvenience. My joy comes on the day they get a new lens through which they see the kingdom of God right in the midst of their ordinary circumstances. Transcendence permeating the mundane! That is what the parables were designed to accomplish.

I. The Parable of the Lamp (4:21-23)

And He was saying to them, "A lamp is not brought to be put under a peck-measure, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it should come to light. If any man has ears to hear, let him hear."

Jesus says that no one brings a lamp into a room and puts it under a peck-measure³ or a bed. Why would

anyone do such a ridiculous thing? A lamp wouldn't fit under a peck-measure; and if it were put under a bed, the bed would catch fire. No. A lamp is placed on a lampstand to illuminate the room. As we saw last week, the parables of Jesus were carefully designed to elicit the attention of hearers by alluding to images and stories that were familiar to Israel, accounts that evoked her hopes and dreams. But, once the hearer had been drawn into the story, Jesus would add a surprising new twist to shatter existing world views.

The image of the lampstand evoked deep emotions in Israel's memory. It reminded them of the seven-branched golden lampstand whose purpose was to illuminate the holy place inside the temple (Exod 25:31-40). It reminded them, too, of the dark days of Judges, when the light was almost extinguished in Israel. It was then that God sent Israel her first prophet, Samuel, who would fan the flame of God's word once more in the nation.

And what revolutionary zeal could be awakened by the memory of Judas Maccabeus, who recaptured and cleansed the temple from Antiochus Epiphanes! Then a new lampstand was made, one which burned a miraculous eight days—the first Hanukkah (164 B.C.). But it was the apocalyptic visions of the prophet Zechariah that kept Israel's zeal at burning point as she awaited the Messianic Age. In chapter 4, the prophet has a vision of a new lampstand with seven lamps of oil that burned so brightly they illuminated the whole earth. When Zechariah asked what this meant, the reply came, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit," says the Lord of hosts" (Zech 4:6).

Had that moment arrived at last? Had the long expected light come in Jesus? "You who walk in darkness will see a great light!" (Isa 9:2). This was what Jesus was claiming. But why then does he conceal the light in parables? He explains that if he has concealed the light of the secrets of the kingdom, it is only a temporary thing. The divine intention was to put that lamp on a lampstand and, like the lampstand in the temple, enlighten the entire nation and beyond to the whole world. For he says of the coming Servant, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob ...I will also make You a light to the nations" (Isa 49:6). But for now, it is reserved for those who have ears to hear. As Tom Wright says:

If too many understand too well, the prophet's liberty of movement, and perhaps life, may be cut short. Jesus knew his kingdom-announcement was subversive. It would be drastically unwelcome, for different reasons, to the Romans, to Herod, and also to zealous Jews and their leaders, whether official or not. He must therefore speak in parables, "so that they may look and look but never see." Only those who are in the know will be allowed to glimpse what Jesus believed was going on. These stories would get past the censor, for the moment.⁴

So, says Jesus, the truth is hidden for now, but that is only temporary; complete disclosure would follow. The purpose behind its being concealed would be revealed, but only through instruments who have ears to hear—the privileged few.

Lest privilege tempt the disciples to pride, Jesus now goes on and picks up the idea of the "measure" in the next parable, followed by the image of a "bed," in verse 27 (we will take this up in our next study).

II. The Parable of the Measure (4:24-25)

And He was saying to them, "Take care what you listen to. By your measure of measure it shall be measured to you; and more shall be given you besides. For whoever has, to him shall {more} be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him."

Here "the metaphors of the lamp and measure (vs. 21, 24) are combined into a double parable by means of the catchword 'measure'."⁵ In this way, Jesus links the theme of light with harvest. This may be an allusion to Isaiah 9:2-3, where the prophet uses these same two images to describe the intense joy Israel would experience when the light of Messiah came:

**"The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them.
You will multiply the nation,
You will increase their gladness;
They will be glad in your presence,
As with the gladness of harvest."**

Now that time of light has arrived, and with it a huge harvest that would bring intense joy in Israel. But, says Jesus, that joy is only for those who have "ears to hear." This image takes the disciples back to the first parable of the sower, encouraging them to be the "good" soil. It is not enough to be passive listeners; they must allow the word to go deep, and they must keep it free from worldly competition and distraction that might choke it out. If they are careful to do that, Jesus says, there will be great reward. For the attention they gave to the parable would be the *measure* of profit they would receive from it. The word *measure* is used three times for emphasis, once as a noun, twice as a verb. This threefold alliteration, "*measure of measure it shall be measured,*" resonated so deeply among the disciples, it is quoted exactly the same way in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So to those who are eager to enter into the parable, who delve deeply into these cryptic metaphors, the reward will be commensurate, and even more shall be given besides.

It seems to me that the "more" is not merely more information, but, rather, the spiritual sensitivity to see in an entirely new dimension. To the casual listener, the parable seems a commonplace illustration. But to those who diligently meditate and beg for more, they will see

beyond these common metaphors to the story of Israel, which was being retold and was even reaching its climax right in front of them, in the person of Jesus. To them yet even more will be given, and they will understand how Israel's story is being made new in them! So the parable would draw them into Israel's story, and, as the disciples of Jesus, they would be on center-stage, so that he, who was now the light of the world, would make them light bearers with him! Through the hard work of study, meditation and prayer (Prov 2:1-4), that cryptic mystery shrouding the parable would give way to wonder, awe and appreciation. The disciples would become part of something much bigger than themselves: an incomprehensible harvest, a whole new creation (2 Cor 5:17).

We see this joy in Peter as he preaches his first sermon, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). On that day, the apostle was drawn into the center of Israel's story, her passions and dreams. He saw what Israel's leaders could not see, because he had a new lens to behold the kingdom right in front on him. Thus he entered into what Isaiah predicted, as in one day three thousand new sons were born:

**“Who has heard such a thing?
Who has seen such things?
Can a land be born in one day?
Can a nation be brought forth all at once?
As soon as Zion travailed, she also brought forth
her sons”** (Isa 66:8).

So, take heed to how you listen. By the measure with which you measure, it shall be measured to you, and more besides. But if you are indifferent to the parable, and never look beyond the surface, not only will it yield no profit, it will be detrimental to you. It will lead to a loss of whatever insight you may have had about the kingdom. In this way, the parables could be compared to our muscles: if we don't use them, they atrophy.

Parables were much more than information booths or academic Hebrew lectures to be casually listened to. Parables were time-sensitive doorways, given when Israel's history was reaching its climax, entrances or exits that sent people inexorably down one of two roads. The parables either sealed them shut in their shallow, three dimensional universe, or opened them up to a new heavenly world in which they would never be the same. The parables divided the true Israel from the false, endowing people with sight or making them blind. Parables were not philosophical homilies. They were gateways that ushered their listeners headlong to their destinies.

Before the disciples hear the rest of the parables, Jesus hands them the two images of a lampstand and a measure. They must understand that the goal of the lamp is to illuminate the nation and the world, but they must never lose sight of the means. If the lamp is hidden under a “peck measure,” that is only temporary. By the measure of attention they give, they will be drawn into the light, becoming lovers of it, and from the inti-

macy of that relationship they will pass it on to the rest of the world. A lamp and a measure, two simple images, but these are indispensable tools needed to enter into the kingdom of God.

III. Implications of the lamp and the measure

A. With what measure do you measure?

Though these parables were time-sensitive to the inauguration of the kingdom in Jesus' day, we must never become callous to the time honored principle that God's truth is organic and precious. God's word is one hundred per cent relational. It is the intimate unveiling of the personal God. God does not merely dispense information, he dispenses himself, his person, in every text of Scripture. And there is nothing more precious than the saving truth of the gospel. Therefore, at every unveiling of his word, we must be attentive and thoughtful. Just as Constantine, who even as emperor humbly rose to his feet in respect whenever the word of God was read, we must in humility pray for open, receptive hearts, and with active minds go beyond the surface of the text to the person of Christ himself.

In this regard, I see three dangers in our modern world. First, there is the great danger of the computer in our information age. We have the ability to access everything, but, tragically, we possess nothing. The parables don't dispense volumes of information; they give just a few images to grip the mind and heart. But it is people's tenacious grip on those images which God uses to open the kingdom to those who love him. The church is in danger of removing that element from worship—the necessity to think, ponder deeply, pray fervently and meditate, and have everything presented in nicely bound pre-wrapped consumer packages. If that is what you want, you might as well go to an athletic event, where the electronic scoreboards even says when and what to yell. Over the last few years, I have noticed that less and less people bring their Bibles in churches that I have visited. The measure we give shall be the measure we receive.

Secondly, I find that our technological world throws so much at us—voice mail, e-mail, answering machines, fax machines, modems, videos, satellites—it is almost impossible to create that sacred solitude where the still small voice of God can speak to us through his word. All these distractions choke out the word. Yet it can be done. Dick Woike spent twenty minutes every day reading through and reflecting on the Bible. Each year he purchased a new Bible and read it straight through, taking notes and recording his meditations every day. He did that each day of his life for over forty years. The measure he gave was the measure he received, and more besides.

Thirdly, many of us wrongly assume that now that the church has become the bearer of that light, that privilege cannot be lost. Let us remember the haunting words of our Lord to the church of Ephesus, that though her doctrine was good, her first love had grown

cold: “The One who walks among the seven gold lampstands, says...repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place” (Rev 2:1, 5). If you visit Ephesus today, you will see that the Lord made good his word. There is neither candlestick nor church there. In fact, there is no city. Remember that the measure we give is the measure we shall receive.

B. How do you pass on the light of the lamp?

We must also remember that though Jesus is the light of world, and that light will one day illuminate the whole earth, the mystery was entrusted to those who loved him. Jesus refused testimony from those who had no relationship with him (the demons), veiled it to those who opposed him (the religious leaders), but he opened it deeply to those who loved him.

The disciples continued this practice in the book of Acts. The apostles gave themselves diligently to public preaching. But, beyond preaching, they were continually reaching for the deep encounters. Acts is filled with very intimate private encounters, especially when the gospel advanced in new directions. Philip engaged a eunuch in the desert; Paul’s wounds were washed in a jailer’s home; Lydia prevailed on the apostle to stay at her house; Titus Justus opened his home next door to the synagogue; a slave named Onesimus provoked a New Testament letter because his master neglected a personal relationship.

What this is saying is that while we keep the goal of world evangelism in mind, we must never forget the means. The light of the gospel is passed through intimate personal encounters that honor people by taking time with them, welcoming them, dining with them. These encounters do not cheapen the gospel with trite phrases or pat answers. They are honest, and give as much of life as they do the message. These encounters are awash in love. We must never allow our technology to deceive us into believing that we can produce the harvest, bypassing the means of the intimate individual encounter.

Amen.

1 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 237.

2 See also Isaiah 5:1-7, where God inspects his vineyard, Israel, and finds no fruit. But in the new age, his seed will bear abundant fruit (Isaiah 55:10-13).

3 “peck-measure”— Bauer defines this as a “grain measure containing 16 sextarii = about 8.75 liters, almost exactly one peck.”

4 Wright, 237.

5 Richard Schneek, S.J., *Isaiah in the Gospel of Mark, I-VIII* (Biblical Press, 1994) 130.

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HOW DOES THE KINGDOM GROW?

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 Brian Morgan
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We are at a critical juncture in our studies in the gospel of Mark. In the midst of fixed opposition to his message, Jesus has changed his method of teaching to parables. He has done so for two reasons. First, he knew that his announcement of the kingdom was dangerous, unwelcome, and subversive to the powers that be, whether they were the Romans, King Herod, or the Jewish zealots. The truth had to be disguised in parables lest the prophet lose his freedom of movement, perhaps even his life. This is why the parables are cryptic metaphors that are dense with meaning.

Elie Weisel is one of the great writers of this century. In his first book, *Night*, he explains how he learned this same mode of speech in the Jewish ghettos during the Holocaust. His book, a mere 109 pages, describes his experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald:

All my subsequent works are written in the same deliberately spare style as *Night*. It is the style of the chroniclers of the ghettos, where everything had to be said swiftly, in one breath. You never knew when the enemy might kick in the door, sweeping us away into nothingness. Every phrase was a testament. There was not time or reason for anything superfluous. Words must not be imprisoned or harnessed, not even in the silence of the page. And yet, it must be held tightly. If the violin is to sing, its strings must be stretched so tight as to risk breaking; slack, they are merely threads.¹

The same could be said of the parables of Jesus. Every phrase is a testament, strung so tight as to make it resonate with emotion.

The second reason why Jesus taught in parables is that by shrouding the truth of the kingdom in a veil of secrecy, only those who gave their full attention to attaining the mystery would comprehend its message. As the truth of the parable was revealed, it became all the more precious to those who had worked to understand it. When truth is hard-won, passions are ignited and the flame of love fills the soul. In this way, the light of the parable was passed on to the world only by those who loved the Savior. Such is the dual nature of parables. They conceal truth from the enemy, but reveal it to lovers of the Savior. My short time in communist Romania, in 1988 and 1989, gave me a taste of this principle. The necessity of having to carefully veil the gospel in the presence of enemy eyes was the very thing that fostered an unquenchable love in those who longed for it. In Romania, I experienced a love from which I have yet to re-

cover.

The mysteries contained in these first parables were essential for the disciples to understand how the kingdom of God grew. Recall that these mysteries all center around the word "seed," which is used twelve times in this chapter. This kingdom would not be inaugurated through sword, politics, or ceremonial ritual, but with a farmer's bag of seed.

In his first parable, Jesus spoke of four different kinds of soil that were present in Israel. The seed which was sown was either snatched up by an enemy, scorched with no root, or choked out by worldly pleasures. But then there was the good soil, whose fertility would far outweigh the initial rejection of the other three. This good soil would bear fruit, thirty, sixty and one hundredfold.

In our text today, Jesus focuses on the good soil. Here he reveals the mystery behind the process of how it brings forth a harvest, in fulfillment of what Isaiah envisioned in the Messianic Age:

**"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
 And do not return there without watering the earth,
 And making it bear and sprout,
 And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;
 So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
 It shall not return to Me empty,
 Without accomplishing what I desire,
 And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it." (Isa 55:10-11 NASB)**

I. The parable of the man and the growing seed (4:26-29)

This parable, which reveals the mystery of spiritual growth, has very significant implications for how we carry out ministry and discipleship in the church.

And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and goes to bed at night and gets up by day [literally: sleeps and rises by night and by day], and the seed sprouts up and grows—how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

A. The ways of the seed imitate the ways of the man

There are two things to note in this parable. First, the intimate connection between the man and the seed, in which the life of the one mysteriously imitates the ways of the other, in a divine rhythm. As the man “throws his seed on the ground,” it becomes a mirror of his life. Just as he sleeps and rises, so the seed dies and sprouts new life. And, just as he is involved in three progressive actions, throwing, sleeping, and rising, so the seed has three progressive stages of growth: first, the blade, then the ear, and finally, the full grain in the ear.² As the man methodically works his way through the fertile fields, and carefully observes the wonders of the seed, he sees his own life mirrored, until with the passing of time, progressive growth leads to a bountiful harvest.

The image of the man and the seed reminds me of pairs figure skating, in which the couple, each the mirror image of the other, float across the ice in a heavenly dance. And yet, what makes the dance even more exquisite is the fact that there is space and freedom between the partners.

B. The ways of the seed distance the man from growth

Gundry points out in his commentary: “the daily round of sleeping at night and rising at day not only provides the passage of time necessary to growth, but also distances the man from the growth.”³ After the man sows the seed, he sleeps. He does not try to maintain control of the seed. And as he sleeps, so does the seed, which enters the sleep of death. When the man rises in the morning, he observes an amazing mystery. A miracle has occurred, how, he does not know. The mystery captures him in awe and wonder. The point of the parable is that it is at the precise moment when the farmer lets go and sleeps, that the divine wonders begin to work.

Judah Halevi, who was born in 1080, was one of Israel’s greatest poets and thinkers. He comments about this amazing mystery of the seed:

God has a secret and wise design concerning us, which should be compared to the wisdom hidden in the seed which falls into the ground, where it undergoes an external transformation into earth, water and dirt, without leaving a trace for him who looks down upon it. It is, however, the seed itself which transforms earth and water into its own substance, carries it from one stage to another, until it refines the elements and transfers them into something like itself, casting off husks, leaves, etc., and allowing the pure core to appear, capable of bearing the Divine Influence. The original seed produced the tree bearing fruit resembling that from which it had been produced. In the same manner the law of Moses transforms each one who honestly follows it, though it may externally repel him. The nations merely serve to introduce and pave the way for the expected Messiah, who is the fruition, and they will all become His fruit. Then, if they acknowledge Him, they will be-

come one tree.⁴

What insight! Like Jesus, this man was not ignorant of the prophecies of Isaiah.

So for God to work and enter into the human activity of sowing, the farmer must go to sleep. Notice also that when the crop has produced its fruit, it does so “by itself,” without the man; and that the readiness of the harvest is determined by the readiness of the fruit, not the decision of the man. So while the growth of the seed mirrors the ways of the man, it is also independent from the man. Man does not determine the fruit, nor the time of harvest. But at the point of harvest, the man is needed again. When he observes that the grain is fully mature, he immediately puts in the sickle. So now the divine dance is complete, as we have observed this “alternating rhythm that starts with a man, leaves him, returns to him, leaves him again, and ends with him.”⁵

As to the meaning of the parable, Tom Wright sums it up well in these words:

Israel’s god is not working in a sudden dramatic way. He will not bring in his kingdom in the manner that Jesus’ contemporaries desired. He is working in a way that is hidden and opaque, but which, nevertheless, Israel *ought* to recognize. There is something strangely familiar about the secret seed. It sleeps and rises, just as the observer does, and yet he does not understand. There may be overtones here of resurrection: this is how the creator god raises the dead in the inauguration of the kingdom, by sowing seeds and letting them grow secretly so that only those with eyes to see can realize what is happening. There are, too, clear overtones of the apocalyptic scenario that is to come: when harvest comes, he puts in the sickle. This refers directly to a passage in Joel (3.13) which speaks of the great coming of judgment and harvest. Jesus is not abandoning the idea that there will be a great judgment in which Israel’s destiny will at last be realized. He is reinterpreting it, declaring that, though there will come a day of clear vindication, at the moment, i.e. during Jesus’ ministry, the seed is growing quietly in ways that Israel does not understand—though she should.⁶

C. Implications for fruit-bearing

What implications can we draw from the parable of the man sowing his seed? I think Jesus is imparting three secrets of the kingdom that create a paradigm for how we cultivate spiritual life. These are found in the three activities of the man: sowing, sleeping, and reaping (i.e. sending the sickle).

First, we learn that the kingdom grows by the deliberate activity of sowing the word in good soil. This is the word of God, which Isaiah said would not go forth without accomplishing the task for which he had sent it. This word is seed that is divinely powerful for eternal life. It must not be tarnished by the opinions of men, or diluted by modern day currents in order to make it politically correct. It does not need to be packaged and

marketed for mass appeal, nor does it need to be defended. It merely needs to be *secretly* sown in good soil and it will bear eternal fruit. That is what Peter said, “you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God...Therefore,...like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Pet 1:23; 2:2).

Sierra County, which lies two hours south of Albuquerque, in New Mexico, is populated by cattle ranchers who live in scattered small towns with populations of less than thirty-five or so. Members of one city council in that county declared 1997 to be the Year of the Bible, and they placed daily Bible readings in local newspapers. This resulted in a lot of opposition at first, but the council members responded that if people didn’t like what they had done, then they were free to throw them out at the next election. My in-laws, who live in Albuquerque, told me they got reports of people buying Bibles and coming to faith in Christ. All this without hype, marketing, or conferences—just reading the Bible. The kingdom grows like an anonymous man who just goes into the fields and sows his seed, silently, secretly, and expectantly. One writer has said that all great projects are conceived in secret.

The second requirement to cultivating spiritual life is that after we have sown the seed, we must go to bed. We must let go so that God can work with the seed and cause it to germinate and sprout. Too often we try to maintain control of those we are attempting to nurture. We act like restless, nervous farmers who sneak out into the fields by moonlight to dig up the seed and inspect the results. Though we are laden with worthy concern, we often do more harm than good, and ruin any possibility of the divine work of integration. Control is very destructive to relationships.

One thing that grieves me today is the infiltration into the church of one of the most worldly of occupations, that of the lobbyist. Lobbyists are driven by a single quest. They are so eager to achieve a certain result, no matter how good the cause, they come to the field, strip off the topsoil, and impose developmental structures like strip malls, totally ignoring the organic workings of the soil. This does bring results, but in my opinion, very little fruit. There is no thought of sleep, no room for divine activity, no time for internalization or individual response. The lobbyist just wants to get the job done. Don’t be a Christian lobbyist! There is no room for coercion in the kingdom. Have you ever see a seed grow by coercion?

Such truth in our parable also calls into question the quest for speed—the element that is most valued today. This painful striving to do things faster and faster robs our lives of the value that comes through divine integration. Our daily rising and sleeping must serve as a continual reminder that if we want God to enter into our daily activity of sowing, we have to learn to sleep, to let go, and die.

So we sow, and then we sleep. Finally, we reap. Then, when the harvest is ready, we put in the sickle. The term for this is literally, “he sends” the sickle. This word comes from the same root as the noun *apostle*, those “sent ones” whom Jesus sent out two by two, in Mark 6:7. As they sowed the word, the apostles expected to reap spiritual fruit in people’s lives. They did not determine what that fruit was, or when it would appear, but they knew it was coming. As Paul wrote to the Colossians, “All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth” (Col 1:6 NIV).

But once that fruit appeared, the apostles felt a keen responsibility to harvest it. When life-changing transformation occurred, it was not to go unnoticed. Time was taken to publicly give thanks, in a letter, a worship service, or through the giving of financial blessing. Paul asked the Corinthians, “If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?” (1 Cor 9:11 NIV). So the word was sown in expectation of fruit, and when that became evident through the process of time, it was sealed in appreciation. Let us never lose sight of this.

May you enter into this wonderful divine dance of man and seed, and may you feel the heavenly rhythms pulsating through all that you do.

Now we come to the final parable in this series, that of the tiny mustard seed.

II. The parable of the mustard seed (4:30-32)

And He said, “How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade.”

Jesus asks, with what shall we picture the kingdom? It is like a mustard seed which is smaller than all the seeds that are sown. The fact that the mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds was proverbial in Palestine.⁷ Yet, though it was the smallest, it produced a tree that was larger than all the garden plants. It grew to about fifteen feet in height and had branches thick enough to support a bird. The image of a tree was a common Old Testament usage to refer to a king and his kingdom. Daniel in his prophecy says, “The tree that you saw, which became large and grew strong...it is you, O king” (Dan 4:20-22). So here the tree is an apt symbol of the new King and his ironically “small” beginnings.

The image of birds of the air nesting in its shade comes from the prophet Ezekiel, who envisioned a future day when God would sow his kingdom in such a way that,

“I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a ce-

dar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.” (Ezek 17:22-24 NIV)

Some commentators suggest that the reference to the birds nesting in the shade of its branches may be referring to the gentile nations coming under the shade of this magnificent tree. I think there is merit to that thought, although we can't know for certain. But in any case, the point is clear. We should not be put off by what looks like insignificant beginnings. This is how God begins his kingdom, with a King who appeared as a mere shoot of the stump of Jesse. He was not part of mainline Judaism, and he had no credentials. He was more like a sucker shoot that is plucked up “like a root out of parched ground,” with seemingly no potential. “He had no stately form or majesty that we should look-upon Him...He...was like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (Isa 53:2-3). Yet, Isaiah says of him,

“Then a shoot will spring from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit” (Isa 11:1).

This stump of Jesse will bear great fruit. His influence will be so great that all nations will come under the protection of his shade. The same is true as we continue advancing the kingdom. This word of the gospel we possess appears insignificant to the world. It is drowned out in our athletic arenas, scorned by our universities, and mocked by our media. In our hands these seeds appear weightless. One breath and they seem to disappear unnoticed into the air. But when they are faithfully sown in humble hearts, on the outskirts of all humanity, they grow, take over, and become the driving force of a life. Eventually the person in whom these insignificant seeds are planted has a broader influence than any university or government can grant. And to our amazement, unexpected guests come from all over the nations to take shelter in their shade.

As we turn to the book of Acts, this is exactly what we find. The kingdom is always growing in new arenas, from the humblest of beginnings, among obscure people of little status and no money, and yet these “no names” become the driving force of history. Imagine what it will be like when that insignificant Jew, a no-name in Rome, beheaded by Nero, wakes us from sleep

and meets all of us who took shelter in the shade of his letters, most of which were written from a prison cell. There will not be an ocean big enough to contain his tears of joy on that day. And he did it all with a little bag of seed. The lesson is clear: Don't be put off by humble beginnings.

Jesus concludes his teaching on parables with the same theme he began with, that of “hearing.”

III. The conclusion of the parables (4:33-34)

And with many such parables He was speaking the word to them as they were able to hear it; and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.

Mark brings this section to an end by saying that Jesus continued to speak the word of God to them, but he disguised it in parables. This was an organic process. Jesus spoke to them “as they were able to hear it.” Parables were not shared for the sake of information; they were like rich meals that had to be eaten, digested and absorbed before one could go on to the next course. And they served the purpose of dividing Israel into two camps, based on their ability to hear. Just as *hearing* was the backbone of spirituality for ancient Israel (“Hear, O Israel!” Deut 6:4) so now it became the way into the new Israel. Those with ears to hear, who took time to enter into the cryptic images of the parable, would see in it Israel's story retold and made new in Jesus; and they would be awakened with awe as they stood at the nerve center of history. But those who refused to hear would not see below the surface. One group was swallowed up in love, the other left to petrify in their own petty, private universe.

What amazing force is contained in these innocuous little stories! Only one question remains: to which group do you belong?

1. Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 321.
2. I am dependent on Robert Gundry for these thoughts in his excellent work, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 220.
3. Gundry, *Mark*, 220.
4. Judah Halevi, *An Argument for the Faith of Israel, The Kuzari* (New York: Schocken, 1964), 226-227.
5. Gundry, *Mark*, 221.
6. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 240-241.
7. C. H. Hunzinger, “*sinapi*,” *TDNT*, 7:289.

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THE NEW EXODUS

Catalog No. 1115
 Mark 4:35-5:20
 14th Message
 Brian Morgan
 May 17th, 1998

Years ago, under Ray Stedman's leadership, our pastoral staff had the privilege of holding pastors conferences around the world. When we visited Australia, I became acquainted with a pastor of a church in Adelaide. In his living room there was displayed a large picture of the city, lit up under the night sky. He told me his vision was to reach all of Adelaide for Christ. Here was a man who had faith for great things, I thought. During my week at the church, I got to know one of the interns. Later, after several years of exchanging letters, I asked him how the church was doing. He said that most of the staff, including the pastor, had left, suffering from burn-out. Sadly, this is all too common in the church. We can have the right vision, whether it's attempting to reach a nation, a city, a company, a neighborhood, or a school, but when we use the wrong method, we burn out.

In our studies in the gospel of Mark we have seen in the parables how Jesus would not have his disciples be ignorant of how the kingdom of God grows. Now the lectures are over. It's time for the tutorial, time to see how much they had learned and were ready to put into practice. What unfolds is the birth of the first Christian missionary, who is sent out on the first citywide evangelistic crusade. How will he do in his assigned task?

As our text opens, Jesus embarks on a boat on the sea of Galilee.

I. Stilling the Storm at Sea (4:35-41)

And on that day, when evening had come, He said to them, "Let us go over to the other side." And leaving the multitude, they took Him along with them, just as He was, in the boat; and other boats were with Him. And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. And He Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" And being aroused, He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. And He said to them, "Why are you so timid? How is it that you have no faith?" And they became very much afraid and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" (NASB)

Having completed his discourse in parables, Jesus now makes a bold decision to go over to the eastern

side of the lake—a remarkable move. This was a predominantly gentile area, ruled by a very strong presence of idolatry and demonic forces. Even the physical characteristics of the shores are ominous and imposing. Bargil Pixner, who spent twelve years living at the north end of the sea of Galilee, describes it as follows:

The steep cliffs of the Hippene, the most northern part of the Decapolis, loomed menacingly from afar. The city of Hippos...lay there like a fortress on the basalt plateau, resembling the head of a noble steed and looking defiantly across to Tiberias, her rival on the other side of the lake. A number of smaller villages were lying around Hippos like little chicks gathered around the mother hen. Kursi, a fishing village in the northwestern corner of the Hippene, as the region was called, was one of the villages over which the city of Hippos held dominion. There Jesus' boat was heading with other boats in its wake.¹

At first glance, Jesus' choice of direction appears a little odd, but as the story unfolds, we sense we have arrived at a much bigger stage than we thought. A huge confrontation between spiritual forces, a confrontation of the magnitude of Israel's first Exodus, is about to occur. Following an exhausting day of preaching, Jesus finds his way to the back of the boat and immediately falls into a deep sleep, oblivious to the currents, the waves, and the storm. It doesn't require much imagination to see behind the gale force winds the threatened powers of the underworld. They were seeking to prevent the prophet from making an appearance on their shores. Their plan was to swamp the boat and drown his venture in the depths of the sea.

The disciples, experienced in the ways of this sea, are wide awake, however. Sparing no effort to save themselves, they are overcome by the waves. As the vessel takes on more and more water, in exasperation they turn to their sleeping rabbi in the stern. Rousing him from his dream-like sleep, they berate him for not lending a helping hand. How can he sleep, seemingly without a care, while they are perishing? Unbeknownst to them, their actions mirror the poetic images of Psalm 107:23-27,

**Others went out on the sea in ships;
 they were merchants on the mighty waters.
 They saw the works of the Lord,
 his wonderful deeds in the deep.
 For he spoke and stirred up a tempest
 that lifted high the waves.**

**They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths;
in their peril their courage melted away.
They reeled and staggered like drunken men;
they were at their wits' end. (NIV)**

Awakening out of his deep sleep, Jesus immediately takes command of the situation. With but a word from him, the gale force winds, described by Mark as "great," become a "great" calm—an eerie, frightening calm. At this point, Psalm 107 reads like a script:

**Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.
He stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea were hushed.
They were glad when it grew calm,
and he guided them to their desired haven.
(Ps 107:28-30)**

To the disciples' surprise, Jesus not only rebukes the wind, he also rebukes them for their timidity and lack of faith. Was this the faith he had just taught them in the parables, that once a man sows the seed, he *sleeps*, then he *rises* up by day to see divine wonders at work? Perhaps. The same words from the parable, *sleeping* and *rising*, are both repeated here, in verse 38. Rather than sleeping, the disciples were acting like nervous farmers who roused their master from his sleep to inspect the difficult situation. When it was over, their fear of the sea was replaced by a greater fear and wonder. Thus their question, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" Who is this, who does things that only the Creator God is said to have done in the Old Testament? Such questions pressed in on them with greater force than the tumultuous waves which threatened their little boat. Their minds were anything but calm as they glided upon the glassy sea, through the stark stillness, with no wind to aid them or oppose them. However, even more wonders await them on the other side, as the confrontation escalates.

II. The Stilling of the Storm Inside the Demoniac (5:1-20)

Our story takes place in three scenes, with three encounters, as Jesus meets a demon-possessed man, some swine-herders, and then the townspeople.

A. Jesus encounters the possessed man (5:1-9)

And they came to the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gerasenes. And when He had come out of the boat, immediately a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit met Him, and he had his dwelling among the tombs. And no one was able to bind him anymore, even with a chain; because he had often been bound with shackles and chains, and the chains had been torn apart by him, and the shackles broken in pieces, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. And constantly night and day, among the tombs and in the mountains, he was crying out and gashing himself with stones. And

seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and bowed down before Him; and crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What do I have to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment me!" For He had been saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" And He was asking him, "What is your name?" And he said to Him, "My name is Legion; for we are many."

Immediately upon disembarking their boat, in hostile pagan territory,² Jesus and the disciples come upon a man who made his dwelling among the tombs. Mark's depiction of the man's dark depravity is lengthy, poignant and gripping. This nameless one makes his home in extreme isolation. Cut off from all the living, he resides among the dead, existing at the mercy of the evil spirit possessing him, a spirit so formidable that no shackles of this world are able to "bind" him. Tortured and tormented, his cries ring out endlessly through the night, his only relief his self-inflicted wounds. I wonder if this graphic portrayal is not an apt description of what goes in the silent seclusion of the souls of many in our world who suffer from the destructive oppression of addictions that lead to self-hatred and, in extreme cases, suicide.

Was this why Jesus came to this side of the lake? I think so. He was the one who came to "bind" the strong man and plunder his goods. Now he had come to seek this unnamed man whom society had cast off as the walking dead. How will he deal with him? Notice he does not address the man, but, rather, the evil spirit residing within him. When he asks the spirit his name, the answer comes, "Legion," a word with military overtones (actually, the technical name for a Roman military company consisting of several thousand troops).³

What follows next is as surprising as it is gripping.

B. Jesus encounters the swine-herds (5:10-14a)

And he began to entreat Him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there was a big herd of swine feeding there on the mountain. And the demons entreated Him, saying, "Send us into the swine so that we may enter them." And He gave them permission. And coming out, the unclean spirits entered the swine; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, about two thousand of them; and they were drowned in the sea. And their herdsmen ran away and reported it in the city and out in the country.

The demons immediately recognize Jesus for who he is, the Most Holy One of God. Fearing his authority, and recognizing that their days of oppressing this man are over, they beg Jesus not to send them out of the country: "Send us into the swine so that we may enter them." Why pigs? Bargil Pixner comments that this may be

an allusion to the Roman legions with whose help Pompey had founded the Decapolis. Pompey came from Syria in 63 B.C. and conferred pagan-hellenistic

city rights on the Decapolis. Because of these legions, the demons insist that they have the right to remain in this region, if not in people, at least in the pigs.

Why pigs? The Canaanites had sacrificed pigs to the demons. The archaeologists have found altars erected for that purpose...So this special relationship between pigs and demons becomes understandable. Moreover the emblem of one of the most famous legions, the Decima Fretensis, was that of the wild boar (cf. also Is 65:48).⁴

This scene is packed with military imagery. And not just in the term "legion," a direct reference to Rome, but also, notes Rikki Watts, "[*send*]" (v. 10) connotes a military command (i.e. to dispatch), [*herd*'], clearly inappropriate for pigs, indicates a band of military recruits, and [*rush*'] (v. 13) describes troops rushing into battle."⁵ It is significant that what Jesus did to the demons in casting them into the sea, is exactly what the Jews were hoping to do to the Romans. Jesus has redefined the enemy. It was not Rome, but demon hoards that had bound Israel and the surrounding gentile territories.

In a word, the spirits evacuate the man and rush into the pigs. They in turn are so startled they rush off the rocky precipice that drops into the sea. What a sight: two thousand pigs flying off into oblivion. The demons are banished, and with them the land is cleansed of any semblance of their idols. What a sign this must have been for the man: a sacred sign and permanent seal of his effective cleansing. This would be comparable to an alcoholic seeing every bottle he had ever touched, every bar stool he had ever sat on, every liquor sign whose neon lights had mesmerized him, and every beer commercial he'd ever seen, all gathered together, and in a moment, cast off the cliff of his city and swept away by the sea, leaving not one drinking establishment for him to enter.

What of the herdsmen? Stunned by what they had seen, they immediately run away and spread the news both far and wide, in the city and the country.

Now comes the ultimate question. How will the townspeople respond to this miracle?

C. Jesus encounters the townspeople (4:14b-20)

And the people came to see what it was that had happened. And they came to Jesus and observed the man who had been demon-possessed sitting down, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the "legion"; and they became frightened. And those who had seen it described to them how it had happened to the demon-possessed man, and all about the swine. And they began to entreat Him to depart from their region. And as He was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed was entreating Him that he might accompany Him. And He did not let him, but He said to him, "Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you." And he went away and

began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone marveled.

The herdsmen's report spreads like wildfire, and everyone comes to see what has occurred. Arriving at the summit, they observe the no-name man, who once walked about naked and demon-possessed, clothed and rational, as quiet as the calm sea. A miracle! A legion of demons had possessed him with a grip so strong that no shackles could contain him. Yet now, with but a word from the prophet, he had been made whole. The sight seizes them with fear. But then they learn of the high price of the cleansing of this one life: it had cost the territory its idols, and them their livelihood. As their materialistic minds ponder the value of this life versus the cost of their idols, they ask Jesus to leave their country. How ironic, that their entreaty echoes the demons' entreaty, in v. 10; but in this case, it is Jesus, not them, who is to be banished.

*Take your leave, Jesus,
and take this friend of thine.
You love his soul,
but we love swine.*

What will Jesus do? Here is another irony. He who conquered the storm with a word, who subdued and bound the strong man, who commanded demons at will, yields when he faces resistance from the human heart.⁶ If the human will says, "No. Please leave," Jesus condescends and leaves. No argument, no pleading, not even a response is recorded. Jesus will not coerce himself upon the human heart. Did you know you had such power over deity? As Jesus embarks in his boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begins entreating him that he might go along. But Jesus instructs him to stay home and declare the great things the Lord had done for him, and how he had mercy on him. The man obeys and goes throughout the whole of the Decapolis, doing what Jesus had asked him, and "everyone marveled."

Now we come to the theological and practical implications of this story.

III. The Implications of the Story

A. The Bay of Pigs = the New Exodus!

When this story is properly understood, it takes on magnificent proportions. The account evokes powerful memories of the Exodus, when Israel came through the sea under divine protection, and then watched as the Egyptian armies with their horses and chariots were swallowed up into the sea. So moved was Moses by the sight that he wrote the long poem of Exodus 15, celebrating the fact that the Creator God had become a Warrior who did battle to deliver Israel from her enemies.

During Israel's exile, the cry came again, "Where is he who brought them through the sea...who divided the waters before them?" (Isa 63:11-12 NIV). The answer comes, that God will bring about a New Exodus that will end Israel's exile once and for all:

**“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are Mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with
you...**

**Thus says the Lord,
Who makes a way through the sea
And a path through the mighty waters,
Who brings forth the chariot and the horse,
The army and the mighty man
(They will lie down together and not rise again).”
(Isa 43:1-2, 16-17 NASB).**

Now “Jesus appears as the Creator-Warrior of the first Exodus as he rebukes the chaos waters, and, in the second, this same Creator-Warrior demonstrates his ability to deliver Israel from the oppressive legion of idol-demons by drowning them in the sea.”⁷ So on the shores of Galilee the Exodus is re-enacted, but on a grander scale, for it is not Rome, but the devil who is defeated.

So why should you fear, O Christian? There is no place where you should fear to tread. No opposition can resist his will. The early Christians rushed headlong into Satanic strongholds to deliver the captives and set them free. But not today. As our world becomes more multicultural, it is not excitement but fear that seizes us, and we withdraw into our safe Christian ghettos.

B. Are you fighting the real enemy?

The second thing that causes me concern is the fact that after Jesus has redefined the enemy for Israel, we continue to fight the wrong foe. The enemy was not Rome; it was the devil and the idolatry that had infiltrated Israel. So why do many Christian ministries focus on Washington? Politicians are not the enemy. In fact, even when they are our friends, they can't do much to advance the kingdom, because no amount of legislation can remove the grip of idolatry. The real enemy is the idolatry that has infiltrated the church.

C. Where is the real point of contention with the world?

When Christ confronted the demons, not only were they banished, the land was cleansed of all idolatry. Two thousand dead pigs testified to that. So we learn that when evil is confronted and cleansed, communities can suffer severe financial cost. This is why we face such widespread opposition to the gospel. We need to count the cost, and remember that just one life made in the image of God is far more valuable than economic systems based on idolatry.

D. What do we do when we are rebuffed?

Finally, we learn that though the gospel may face almost universal rejection, we should not try to counter with rebuttal or more force. Let us look instead to the tiny remnant which does respond. In this instance, the

remnant was but one, a tiny mustard seed. Yet Jesus tells this insignificant one to go and share his story throughout the “Decapolis,” the ten cities, the area east of the Jordan and Galilee. G. A. Smith, the great Palestinian geographer, writes that this was a flourishing area at the time of Jesus’ ministry: “Permeated by Greek influence, but cosmopolitan by reason of commerce, history, and geographical position,”⁸ it was home to philosophers, teachers, temples, amphitheaters, art, games and literature, and served as a bridgehead to empires to the east. Our own Bay Area is remarkably similar to this region.

This was where this “no-name” went to tell his story of the great things that Jesus had done for him, and “everyone marveled.” “*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound—That saved a wretch like me!*” And when Jesus returns there, he will harvest the fruit of this man (Mark 7:31). Pixner writes,

In less than four centuries a magnificent cathedral would stand there on those heights. The presence of a bishop of Hippos at the very first Church Councils (Nicea, Constantinople, etc.) will bear witness of how Christianity conquered heathendom. Did the Christians of Hippos remember their first missionary by building the chapel which can still be seen at the site of his tomb-cave on the slope above Kursi?⁹

Therein lies the power of the kingdom for those who have eyes to see, a kingdom for which you never have to burn out. Amen.

1. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin, 1992), 42.

2. Rikki E. Watts in his excellent work, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997, 166), suggests that there may be some ambiguity as to whether this man is a gentile or a Jew. The geography is certainly gentile, though “we know that during the Maccabean expansion Alexander Janneus seized Gerase ca. 82 B.C. ...and that a number of Jews remained in the regions, at least to the time of the First Jewish Revolt.” The context of Isaiah 65, from which there are many allusions, also suggests he might have been Jewish.

3. “By the end of the 1st century A.D. the legion contained about 6000 men.” W. White, in the *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 3:907.

4. Pixner, *Fifth Gospel*, 43.

5. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus*, 159.

6. This is Pixner's observation, *Fifth Gospel*, 45.

7. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus*, 161.

8. G. A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 9th ed. pg. 601.

9. Pixner, *Fifth Gospel*, 46.



A FAMILY OF TWELVE: A NEW CREATION

Catalog No. 1116

Mark 5:21-43

15th Message

Brian Morgan

May 31st, 1998

One of the deepest longings of the human soul is the desire to belong. Everyone feels the need to belong to a family, a community, a nation. This need is coming in for a lot of attention these days, because in our fragmented world there are fewer and fewer families and communities where "belonging" is safe. Yet the need persists, and when it is denied, the ramifications can be devastating. What drives an adolescent to arm himself with semi-automatic weapons and turn his school cafeteria into a bleeding Bosnia? What drives teenagers into easy sex and alcohol? Often-times these things are not indulged for the sake of pleasure, but, rather, to numb the pain of isolation and rejection. Usually, the greater the rejection, the more extreme the behavior.

The apostle Paul well understood this need to belong. He told the Galatian Christians the reason they were walking away from freedom and returning to the tyranny of legalism had nothing to do with theology; it came from the feeling of being shut out by their friends. "They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out, in order that you may seek them" (Gal 4:17), wrote Paul.

No one had a more acute understanding of the need to belong than Jesus of Galilee. He was rejected by his family, his nation and, ultimately, his God. Out of the ache of that rejection his task was to create a new family and a new nation, one in which, in the words of Isaiah, "the wolf and the lamb shall graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall do no evil or harm in all My holy mountain" (Isa 65:25).

If you feel alone today and are looking for a safe place to belong, then this text from the gospel of Mark, which tells the story of that new creation, is for you.

I. A Distraught Father (Mark 5:21-23)

And when Jesus had crossed over again in the boat to the other side, a great multitude gathered about Him; and He stayed by the seashore. And one of the synagogue officials named Jairus came up, and upon seeing Him, fell at His feet, and entreated Him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death; please come and lay Your hands on her, that she may get well and live." (NASB)

In our last study in Mark we saw Jesus driving a legion of demons out from a demoniac and into a herd of two thousand pigs, which galloped headlong off a cliff to be drowned into the sea. The scene was like a new Exodus. People were caught in awe and wonder. But surprisingly, when the townspeople discovered the financial cost of healing the demoniac, they abruptly asked Jesus to leave.

Operating under the strict guideline that God's kingdom is never to be coerced, Jesus departed, but not before he had secretly planted a small seed in that hostile soil—the man from whom he had cast out a legion of demons. He commissioned him to tell his story throughout the ten cities of the Decapolis. Though he appeared insignificant in the midst of that thriving culture, the former demoniac was like a mustard seed which would bear much fruit and become an influential tree in God's garden.

Returning to the northwestern side of the lake now, Jesus finds a large crowd awaiting him. The people press in on him, demonstrating the magnetism he continued to evoke. From out of the crowd emerges a leader in this Jewish community, a "synagogue official." The word is a technical term for "the lay official responsible for the supervision of the synagogue building and the arrangements for the services."¹ The man's Hebrew name, Jairus, can mean either "he will enlighten," or "he will *arouse* or *awake*"—a subtle preview of what is to come.

Jairus is so filled with anxiety for his daughter that upon seeing Jesus he immediately casts all dignity aside and falls at his feet. With grief-stricken urgency he pleads with Jesus for the life of his precious little girl, who is at death's door. There was enough evidence around Galilee to convince this Jew that if Jesus would but come and lay his hands on her she would be healed of her affliction. Such a scene grips the heart of any parent who has been in similar circumstances. When the life of your child is threatened, your world collapses, your insides cave in, and your resolve is fortified to risk everything for your child.

But the language here reveals that Mark wants us to see more in this than the rescuing of a physical life. Gundry notes that Mark's use of the terms "be saved" and "live," instead of the more common "be healed" or "be cured," "carry overtones of a larger salvation that includes eternal life."² How it must have amazed the crowd to see the ruler of the synagogue falling at the feet of this carpenter and entreating him with such passion for things a Jew would only entreat Yahweh at the temple. We ought to find it no less amazing. Such a scene should make us want to ask, "Who is this carpenter?"

II. An Unclean Woman (Mark 5:24-34)

And He went off with him; and a great multitude was following Him and *pressing* in on Him. And a woman who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and had endured much at the hands of many physicians, and had spent all that she had and was not helped at all, but rather had grown worse, after hearing about Jesus, came up in the crowd behind Him, and *touched* His

cloak. For she thought, "If I just touch His garments, I shall get well." And immediately the flow of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. (5:24-29)

So critical is the condition of the girl, Mark records no verbal response from Jesus, only decisive, immediate action: "And He went away with him." As Jesus and Jairus take off in tandem, like an ambulance fixed on a rescue mission, the multitude press in on Jesus from every side. In their midst is another victim of circumstance. Mark's lengthy description of this unnamed woman interrupts our journey, causing us to slow down and linger over her condition.

Present in that surging crowd was one who for twelve years had been crippled by a hemorrhage. She had spent all her wealth seeking a cure, but her condition grew worse. Not only was she physically hampered and psychologically humiliated at the hands of physicians, the cleanliness laws in Israel (Lev 15:25-30) rendered her unclean as long her condition lasted. Her bed, her garments, anything she sat on became unclean, as did anyone with whom she came in contact. During twelve years of pain, humiliation and isolation, she was cut off from all community and worship.

Only in the last several years have I come to understand the power of uncleanness as I have listened to the stories of women who had suffered sexual abuse. I learned it wasn't the life-threatening danger that lived on to haunt these women; rather, it was the shame of uncleanness left in the wake of the violation. They had been defiled in the very area that is most sacred, the very springs of life. Their shame had walled them up in silence and seclusion, a shame that would re-enter the privacy of their locked souls unannounced, and relentlessly torment them day and night in the reenactment of the horror they had suffered.

Mark's graphic description draws us into this woman's story and evokes our empathy. But, as we observe even more carefully, we get the impression that Mark paints her condition as symbolic of the nation of Israel. Her ailment had lasted for twelve years, the same number as the tribes of Israel. Further, the adjectives he uses to describe her were used by the prophet Isaiah of the uncleanness that had brought about Israel's exile:

**"For all of us have become like one who is unclean,
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;
And all of us wither like a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
And there is no one who calls on your name,
Who arouses himself to take hold of You." (Isa 64:6-7)**

Is this Mark's way of saying the woman's condition was the condition of all Israel? Perhaps. The last two verbs, "arouse," and "to take hold of," prefigure the story of Jairus, who will "arouse" himself to find Jesus, and the woman, who "will take hold of" his garment.

Another thing that is intriguing about this story is the woman's faith. She believes so strongly in the power residing in Christ, she feels that just one touch of his garment will make her clean. This is new theology in Israel! Rather

than Jesus being made unclean by the touch of her uncleanness, his holiness is so powerful, his life so full of God's Spirit, that just one touch of his garment will make her clean! Here is the birth of a new age, one in which holiness is so intensified that just one touch of the holy makes the foulest thing clean. This has tremendous implications for the church. Why should we fear the infiltration of the world? It is the world that should fear Christians' infiltration into their arena, because everything we touch becomes holy!

So, with one touch of Jesus' garment, the woman's fountain of blood is immediately dried up. Mark intensifies the description of her malady, from "flow" to "fountain" and then to "affliction"—literally "whip, scourge, affliction," to "emphasize the severity of her condition and thus magnify Jesus' power"³ to heal her.

And immediately Jesus, perceiving in Himself that the power from Him had gone forth, turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched My garments?" And His disciples said to Him, "You see the multitude pressing in on You, and You say, 'Who touched Me?'" And He looked around to see the woman who had done this. But the woman, fearing and trembling, aware of what had happened to her, came and fell down before Him, and told Him the whole truth. And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has saved you; go in peace, and be healed of your affliction." (5:30-34)

Immediately the woman touches his garment, Jesus becomes aware that the power residing in him has gone out of him. This was not magic. As Cranfield writes: "There is nothing here inconsistent with the fact that the power residing in, and issuing from, Jesus, is the personal power of the personal God. Though Jesus does not himself make a decision in this case, nevertheless God does. God controls his own power. He knows about the woman and wills to honor her faith in the efficacy of his power active in Jesus, even though her faith is no doubt very imperfect...The cure does not happen automatically, but by God's free and personal decision."⁴

Jesus seeks out the woman, not to make the miracle known, but to perfect the imperfect faith of the one who had touched him. He does not want to heal or help someone without sealing the relationship. In the same way, Jesus is never too busy or in too great a hurry to deal with us, for our relationship to him is more important than solving the problems we bring to him. This has great implications for the church in this day of mass production mentality.

So Jesus stops the mission and asks, "Who touched my garment?" The disciples are dumbfounded by his question. "You see the whole crowd pressing in on you, and you ask, 'Who touched me?'" they say. Yes, many were touching him, but only one touch had faith. O God, give us that faith! How often has Jesus been in our midst and we have rubbed against him and walked alongside him, but never reached out to seize him in faith!

Sensing she has been discovered, the woman is overcome with awe and fear, a fear that strangely repels and draws her at the same time. But the look of acceptance in

Jesus' eyes makes her feel so safe and accepted that the tension is relieved. She casts herself at his feet and tells all, holding nothing back—nothing of her affliction, her sordid story, her uncleanness; it is all out in the open. And with that full confession, she becomes a member of the new family. This is a very important aspect to our being healed. As we have already seen, healing is done in community.

Jesus seals the relationship with even more blessing. He says to the woman, "*Daughter*, your faith has saved you; go in peace, and be healed of your affliction." *Daughter*, that most precious of titles, the one that had evoked the most precious tears in Jairus, becomes the woman's gift. *Daughter*. How I love that title. The shame that once secluded and silenced her now vanishes like dew under the heat of day. That one touch of faith has granted her eternal blessings of salvation, *shalom*, and complete restoration.

But, while Jesus' sensitive, attentive response to the woman's tender touch brought her immeasurable blessing, Jairus is left with no little anxiety. What would you think of being in an ambulance that was carrying your dying daughter and having it suddenly stop to give aid to another accident victim?

III. A Dead Daughter (Mark 5:35-43)

While He was still speaking, they came from the house of the synagogue official, saying, "Your daughter has died; why trouble the Teacher anymore?" But Jesus, overhearing what was being spoken, said to the synagogue official, "Do not be afraid, only believe." And He allowed no one to follow with Him, except Peter and James and John the brother of James. (5:35-37)

Jesus hasn't even finished conversing with the woman when the worst possible news is brought to the anxious Jairus. It was a parent's worst nightmare: "Your daughter has died; why trouble the Teacher anymore?" But Jesus, overhearing the question, encourages the synagogue official to be like the woman—to stop fearing and continue believing. The verbs are present tense, suggesting not a one time action, but a steady, persevering attitude. For just as the severity of the woman's condition and the loss of hope in man to help is what thrust her faith upon Jesus, so now Jairus' destitute condition is what should encourage him to continue to believe and overcome his fears.

Separating himself from the crowd, Jesus goes on with only Jairus and three of the disciples, Peter, James, and John, the same three who will witness the transfiguration and Gethsemane. Verse 38:

And they came to the house of the synagogue official; and He beheld a commotion, and people loudly weeping and wailing. And entering in, He said to them, "Why make a commotion and weep? The child has not died, but is asleep." And they began laughing at Him. But putting them all out, He took along the child's father and mother and His own companions, and entered the room where the child was. And taking the child by the hand, He said to her, "Talitha kum!" (which translated means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise!"). And immediately the girl rose and began to walk; for she was twelve years old. And immediately

they were completely astounded. And He gave them strict orders that no one should know about this; and He said that something should be given her to eat. (5:38-43)

They find the home of Jairus in an uproar, overrun with grief, emotion, and loud wailing. Jesus enters and, with a word, calms the sea of emotion: "Why make a commotion, the little child has not died [she is alive], but is sleeping [and will wake up]." But he hasn't even seen the girl. How can he make such a diagnosis? They laugh at him. In the face of their mocking laughter, however, Jesus immediately takes command of the situation. He clears the house of all but the little girl's parents, enters her room and takes her by the hand. With but two words, "*Talitha kum*" ("little girl arise"), she rises from the dead. Her cure is as immediate as that of the hemorrhaging woman. *Talitha kum*: two Aramaic words which the disciples would never forget. *Talitha* is a very affectionate term which can mean "little lamb" or "child." It is found in a poetic description of Israel's future shepherd who "gathers the lambs with his arm and in his bosom he will carry them"⁵ (Isa 40:11; see also Mark 6:34). That future shepherd for whom Israel had so longed to lead her out of exile had arrived.

At this point we learn that the girl is twelve years old. Now she is awake and walking in newness of life. The home which was once overcome with grief is now awash with awe—the same astonishment that overcame the disciples when Jesus calmed the sea. He commands the witnesses to secrecy, and instructs them to feed the girl before the people outside discover she is alive and begin to inundate her with questions. Jesus then wants to delay the discovery "so as to get away from the large crowd that have been crushing him," lest now hearing this report, "he might be thronged to death."⁶

So what is Mark, the master storyteller, telling us about Jesus, and about our journey of faith in the kingdom of God?

IV. The Implications of our Story

A. Who is this Jesus?

Who is this carpenter turned itinerant prophet wandering around Galilee, stilling storms, commanding demons, and now cleansing the unclean and raising the dead? If we place this story against the backdrop of the book of Isaiah, the picture emerges with amazing clarity. Isaiah concludes with the nation lamenting her condition in exile and crying out to her God:

**"Where is He who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of His flock?
Where is He who put His Holy Spirit in the midst of them...
Look down from heaven, and see from Your holy and glorious habitation;
Where are Your zeal and Your mighty deeds?
The stirrings of Your heart and Your compassion are restrained toward me...
Return for the sake of Your servants, the tribes of Your heritage." (Isa 63:11, 15, 17)**

In response to that desperate cry, God says he will re-

turn, and when he does, he will not just reform Israel, he will institute a whole new creation:

**“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;
And the former things shall not be remembered or
come to mind.**

**But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create;
For behold I create Jerusalem for rejoicing,
And her people for gladness.**

I will also rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in My people;

**And there will no longer be heard in her
The voice of weeping and the sound of crying.**

**No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a
few days...**

**It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer;
and while they are still speaking, I will hear.”
(Isa 65:17-20, 24)**

A careful look at the exquisite tapestry of this story in Mark reveals that Jesus did not merely heal two random lives, but through what appeared to be a tragic delay, he integrated them into one family: a new family made up of a father, who was a synagogue ruler, a woman, and a daughter, a complete family restored around the number twelve.

This new little family is a cameo of an Israel fully restored from her uncleanness (Isa 64:6-7) and death. Mark is saying that God’s response to our plight is not to bring reform, but a brand new creation, and that in the coming of Jesus that new creation has begun. Rikki Watts explains it well:

Jesus is presented as...the one who heals Israel of her uncleanness and, by restoring the child to life, signals the inauguration of the promises of Yahweh’s new creational restoration of Israel. In other words, these miracles bear all the hallmarks of the indicating that, in response to the lament and promise which concludes the book of Isaiah, Yahweh has indeed ‘split the heavens’ (Mk 1:10; Isa 63:19), sent his Holy Spirit among his people (Mk 1:10; 3:22-30; cf. Isa 63:10-14), and come down in Jesus, as the mighty Warrior (Mk 3:27), to inaugurate the [New Exodus].⁷

The question that remains is,

B. How do we enter that new creation?

We enter it by faith. This faith was born and developed in both Jairus and the woman through the agonizing means of delay and death. For the woman, it involved twelve years of waiting, and spending all that she had. For Jairus, the delay was but a few moments, but those seconds seemed like an eternity to this waiting father: they were enough to place his twelve-year old daughter in the grave. In both cases, the delay caused both the woman and Jairus to abandon hope in the world and throw themselves at the feet of Jesus, hoping for a new creation. For Jairus, there was no hope left in the synagogue or the temple. For the woman, there was no money left, and not a physician

who hadn’t abused her. The woman was trusting in the life of Jesus, which was so holy that just one touch transformed her uncleanness into what was holy; and the laws which once excluded became obsolete. For Jairus, with the encouragement of what he had observed in the woman, he would follow Jesus to the grave and out the other side to see his daughter walk in newness of life.

This is how we enter into this new creation: when we lose hope in the world to restore our marriage, wash away our despair, or cleanse our shame. When there is no more hope, and only a new creation will suffice, it is then we thrust ourselves at the feet of Jesus and enter into this new creation. “If any man is in Christ, a new creation!” (2 Cor 5:17).

Finally, we observe in our story what happens as a result of this new creation.

C. What happens as a result of this new creation?

The delay not only developed faith, it integrated people who were once painfully isolated and alone into a family, and the family into a nation (symbolized by the number 12). Our story ends not with three isolated individuals, but a father, mother and daughter, all inescapably joined into one family. And now whenever Jairus gazed into the eyes of his beautiful daughter, he would see the face of this woman, whose faith encouraged him to trust in Christ for a new creation.

Such are God’s amazing ways. He uses the very shame and suffering that once isolated and shut us out from community and worship as tools for creating safe communities. Once we come out into the open and expose our shame, like this woman, our suffering becomes the doorway that integrates us with countless lives in the new family of God, so that individuals are bound into families and families into a nation, the new Israel of God.

“And it will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear.” (Isa 65:24)

1. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 183.

2. Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 268.

3. Gundry, *Mark*, 269.

4. Cranfield, *Mark*, 185.

5. This is Richard Schneck’s observation in *Isaiah in the Gospel of Mark, I-VIII* (Berkeley: Bibal, 1994), 137-138.

6. Gundry, *Mark*, 277.

7. Rikki Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1997), 176 fn.

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COMING HOME

Catalog No. 1117

Mark 6:1-13

16th Message

Brian Morgan

June 7th, 1998

June is the wonderful month of homecoming. In our house, it's the time for one of our daughters to come home from her first year at college. She is excited to be back again, returning to all that's familiar. At the top of her list is her mother's cooking, having her own room, and getting her laundry washed. Then there are reunions with her high school friends, those female friendships that never die. Such is the excitement of homecoming.

But homecoming can be a time of apprehension, too. Returnees wonder if the new things they have tasted, the new people they are becoming, will be recognized and appreciated. Will they be free to express themselves, or will they be forced back into old molds? Homecoming can be especially traumatic for one who has become a Christian in a new environment and must return to a home saturated with unbelief or agnosticism; or to a religious home, where relationships are well defined in a rigid structure. How will their new life be received? Even in the best of homes, homecoming can be bit stifling.

Discipleship involves breaking away from our family of origin to become part of a new, larger family in which we find our true identity in Christ. In our study in the gospel of Mark today, we will learn that part of that growing up process involves an occasional "coming home" to face some painful but necessary realities, as Jesus returns home to Nazareth for the first time since his baptism, which marked the beginning of his public ministry. Considering who he was, where he had been and what he had done, we can only imagine how he must have felt. The events of recent days had placed him on the east side of the sea of Galilee, reenacting Israel's exodus, stilling the sea by the power of his word, and conquering a legion of demons by casting them into the sea, as Moses had done with Pharaoh and his chariots.

Then, returning to the west side of the lake, Jesus pushed the theological limits even further in the healing of the hemorrhaging woman and the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead. In these actions, Jesus appears as the one "who heals Israel of her uncleanness and, by restoring the child to life, signals the inauguration of the promises of Yahweh's new creational restoration of Israel."¹ Wherever he goes or whatever stage he appears on, viewers are filled with awe and wonder. Now he must step off that large public stage and return to the home where he grew up as a boy, in the obscurity of a neighborhood, and in the simplicity of a job. How would the town of Nazareth receive its native son?

I. The First Reception: Jesus Comes Home (6:1-6a)

A. Nazareth takes offense at its native son (6:1-3)

And He went out from there, and He came into His home town; and His disciples followed Him. And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this [guy] get these things, and what is this wisdom given to [this guy], and such miracles as these performed by His hands? Is not this [guy] the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him. (NASB)

Setting out from Jairus' home, Jesus comes into his home-town of Nazareth. Mark is careful to note that he has his disciples in tow, demonstrating that what follows is very important in their education (and ours too, as to what it means to be a disciple). As was his custom, he enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and begins to teach. Mark does not record the content of his teaching, but Luke indicates how controversial it was (Luke 4:16-30). The writer's sole interest is in the reaction that Jesus provoked. He says that as they listened to Jesus' teaching for the first time, most of the people from his home town "were being knocked out"² by what he said. We could interpret this graphic metaphor as "offended astonishment." Their response provoked a series of four questions revolving around the tension of what they had just seen and heard, with what they knew about Jesus' background.

The first question is a terse three phrases, with no verbs. Literally, they ask, "From whence this one these things?" How shockingly impersonal! They won't even bring themselves to pronounce his name, lest their lips become unclean. Their ears hear his wisdom, but in their frustration they can't identify its source, since Jesus never had any authorized rabbinical training. Their eyes witness the miracles (v. 5), but their minds can't perceive the source of power that works through his hands.

Forced to further ponder the paradox, they focus on his occupation and family background, the lens through which they had viewed him for some thirty years. "Is not this guy the carpenter?" they ask. Palestinian Jews did not despise manual labor, but in this case they defined Jesus by his occupation, much as our modern world does with people today. In this regard, how could this local carpenter suddenly break in as a prophet? Then they ask, "Is this not the son of Mary?" Some scholars (Taylor) believe it was "contrary to Jewish custom to describe a man as the son of his mother, even when the father was no longer living, except in insulting terms...it seems quite likely that rumors to the effect that Jesus was illegitimate did circulate."³ Though we can't be sure whether the term "son of

Mary" insinuates illegitimacy, it does seem likely that it was derogatory to some degree. And we must not forget how important legitimate birth rights were in Israel. Any hint of illegitimacy would cause great pain to a Jew.

Then they bring up the issue of his brothers and sisters. Is not this guy "the brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" As they wrestled with the astonishment of what they had just seen and heard about Jesus, and place it under the defining lens of his occupation and family background, their astonishment quickly evaporates and is replaced with contempt—a contempt that "scandalized" them. The term literally means "a trap." Whenever we view Jesus' life through the lens of the flesh (in this case his family of origin), we become caught in the trap of unbelief and are unable to see the kingdom of God.

Gundry points out the real irony of their questions:

For Mark, identifying Jesus as the carpenter misses his identity as the one stronger than John the Baptizer (1:7). Identifying him as Mary's son misses his identity as God's Son (1:1, 11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:6; 13:32; 14:61-62; 15:39). Identifying him as the brother of James, Joses, Jude, and Simon misses his identity as the one whom another Simeon (plus his brother Andrew) and another James (plus his brother John) dropped everything to follow (1:16-20). And saying that his sisters are there misses his having just recently healed the woman with the flow of blood and raised Jairus' daughter.⁴

So the lens of family origin has blinded his family to everything Jesus was and to the new creation he was bringing about. This would be like going home after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize and finding your family relating to you still as an adolescent, recognizing nothing of what you had accomplished or who you had influenced, for the lens with which they viewed you was as one-dimensional as it was accurate. What disappointment! Have you ever felt that? Everyone in my wife's family passed away without understanding and fully appreciating who she is in Christ. Life experiences like these leave us with a nagging ache. But our text reminds us that such experiences are necessary for discipleship in Christ.

Jesus does not leave their questions unanswered. Skillfully he cuts through the sham of their contempt, exposing the real nature of their unbelief.

B. Jesus reacts to rejection (6:4-6a)

And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his home town and among his own relatives and in his own household." (6:4)

Jesus answers quite firmly that he is a prophet in Israel. What made prophets such was not their education, family background or human achievement; rather, it was the divine calling of God and the endowment of the Spirit. As was the case with all of Israel's prophets, familiarity bred contempt, blindness and dishonor. The original reads slightly stronger than our English translations: "A prophet is not dishonored (or shamed, disgraced) except in his home town."

Notice that the careful wording in Jesus' answer, "home

town, relatives and his own household," moves from the wide circle of community relationships, those of one's home town, to the most intimate, those of one's own family. Each phrase intensifies the intimacy and, with it, the pain of rejection. But even more than this, behind these words the sensitive listener would hear the resounding echo of the ancient call of Israel's first prophet. In that epoch-making call, God said to Abraham, in Genesis 12:1-2a,

**"Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you;
And I will make you a great nation."**

These verses are the very heart of Old Testament theology. When Abraham, the father of Israel, was called to inherit a new land and to become the people of God, he had to *separate* from his country, his relatives and family. Is Jesus implying that he himself is the new prophet, set out on a mission as large as Abraham's: to inherit a new land larger than Israel (Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13), and to create a new people of God that would transcend national Israel (Eph 2:11-17)? If he is, the painful irony here is that neither his hometown nor his family, who claimed to be followers of Abraham, can see it. In light of the claim of Jesus, his rejection by his family and relatives declares them, in essence, to be gentiles!

And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And He wondered at their unbelief. (6:5-6a)

Because of their unbelief, Mark records that Jesus was not able to do any miracle there, with the exception of laying his hands on a few sick people and healing them. For Jesus to do miracles in the face of unbelief would only further harden the hearts of the community against any future possibility of repentance.

Have members of your family turned a deaf ear to the wondrous news and events of the new creation in and around your life, and have you found yourself strangely locked up in silent sorrow as a result? The text tells us how Jesus felt: "He *wondered* at their unbelief." The word means to be "caught up in wonder, to marvel, be astonished, be amazed, surprised." Normally it is used of people's reaction to the teaching and miracles of Christ, but twice in the gospels, Jesus is the subject of this verb. It is used here, that he *marveled* at their unbelief, and again in Matthew 8:10. Upon hearing of the gentile centurion's faith, Jesus marveled and said, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel."

Does it surprise you that Jesus was amazed by his family's lack of faith? His study of Israel's past and of the prophecies about him had prepared him for their initial rejection, so that at least in his mind he knew what was coming. Jesus was well versed with Jeremiah, Israel's greatest prophet, from the town of Anathoth. After the prophet was anointed by the Spirit, he returned home and delivered some of his early prophetic oracles there, only to have the townspeople respond by conceiving a plot to take his life. But knowing in the mind and experiencing in the

heart are two different things. Jesus was astonished that after his teaching and miracles had moved a hometown audience to amazement, he watched every trace of that wonder and awe dry up because of their inability to break away from family familiarity. Thus, "He marveled at their unbelief." Perhaps there have been times when you saw the work of God in a family member and have been deeply moved, perhaps even to tears. But, what happened afterwards? Did you allow the familiarity of the flesh to destroy the transcendence of that moment? If you did, know that it evoked a deep response in heaven: Jesus *marvels* at your unbelief.

In the next scene, we see what Jesus did in the face of this rejection.

II. The Second Reception: Sending out the 12 to all Israel (6:6b-13)

And He was going around the villages teaching.

And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out [two by two]; and He was giving them authority over the unclean spirits; and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belt; but to wear sandals; and He added, "Do not put on two tunics." And He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. And any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake off the dust from the soles of your feet for a testimony against them." And they went out and preached that men should repent. And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.

Notice three things in this text. The first is that the kingdom is not thwarted by rejection. In fact, to our surprise, the rejection at Nazareth enhances and multiplies by twelve the new creation and the work and mission of Jesus. Here is Jesus, summoning to himself the twelve, then commissioning, delegating, and entrusting his work and mission to them—and they are fully empowered by and with his authority. Just as he had taught with authority regarding the arrival of the kingdom of God, so they will now preach. Just as he had cast out demons as a sign that he had overcome the strong man, and was now plundering his goods, so they too will cast out demons. And just as he had healed the sick as a sign of the inauguration of the new age of the new creation, so now they would heal the sick by anointing them with oil. Jesus was rejected at home, but as a consequence, a miniature Israel, complete with twelve tribes, is reborn in Galilee. I have found the same to be true in my own life. Rejection enhances the life of the new creation.

The second thing to notice is that Jesus sent them out solely by faith. They were to take precious little for their journey: no money, no food, no credit cards. They were to be totally dependent on Israel's hospitality for their provisions. That is why he allowed but one tunic—so they would not be tempted to use a second as a covering, like a sleeping bag, to sleep in the open. They were forced to make contact, build relationships and penetrate the homes

of Israel. This is a great rule for evangelistic missions. Ministering in a foreign country, a Third World country at that, and depending on the hospitality of the locals for your provision does wonders for your faith. It makes staying in hotels seem boring by comparison.

Thirdly, Jesus prepares them for the same dual reception he had received. Some homes, like the home of Jairus, would welcome them with open arms, and in that case they were to remain there until they left town. Other homes would receive them in the manner that Jesus' family received him in Nazareth. Their background would be called into question, their training come under scrutiny and their message be refused. In the face of that rejection they were to shake the dust off their feet as testimony against them. This was an action symbolic of what Jesus had earlier implied verbally to his family in Nazareth. In this act, the twelve were saying that if people refused to join this new Israel, they were no longer Israel, but were gentiles. As Cranfield writes,

The dust of a heathen land was carefully removed from the feet and clothing by pious Jews before re-entering Jewish territory, as something defiling. So the significance of the action here enjoined is to declare the place which rejects them heathen. At the same time it is to give warning that the missionaries have fulfilled their responsibility toward the place and henceforth the inhabitants must answer for themselves.⁵

III. Implications of our story

A. Rejection, though painful, is necessary, so expect it

Rejection is part and parcel of being a disciple of Christ. Familiarity does not enhance spirituality; more than likely, it breeds contempt. It is difficult to identify and appreciate the work of the Spirit among those who know you best "in the flesh." That is why rejection often comes from those closest to us. We must face the fact that we probably will never get the praise and recognition we so long for from our family of origin, or those who are closest to us.

This leads us to our second principle.

B. Rejection, though painful, is profitable, so welcome it

Rejection thrusts us into the new and larger family, and onto a stage much larger than home. This stage encompasses the whole world. It takes us to places we thought we would never go and sets us free to love with a larger capacity than we ever dreamed. That gaping ache of rejection becomes the channel for divine love, so we should welcome it.

C. Our role as disciplers in the new creation

What is the best gift we can give the next generation, the gift that will foster faith like nothing else? The best gift my parents ever gave me was being *sent*. I was sent away to school, and later sent away to another country to study. In that larger foreign world outside my home, with no props of support, I discovered the love of Christ and his body. In this church we find that whenever young people are "sent" to a larger stage than home, "sent" to walk in a new arena where we are not there to care for them and protect

them, it is there they discover the kingdom of God, the love of Christ, and, best of all, who they are in Christ.

My children are now at this stage. Emily and I are in the process of learning to let go and to *send* them out. A good friend has been a wonderful model to me in this area. Last week, his sixteen-year old daughter was baptized. In response to the emotion of the day, he wrote her a beautiful poem that expresses the power and joy in letting go a precious child to discover a bigger world in the body of Christ.

TALITHA KUM
Mark 5:41

Little girl, arise.
I say to you, little girl, arise!

There is a way of life
that leads to destruction.
There is a way of life
that leads only to desolation and
utter oblivion.
It is a dry dust that is harsh in the nostrils of the West
wind
a powder of chaff
that rolls aimlessly adrift beneath the mountain of God
beneath the habitation of the Most High
a compost where nothing takes root
and no legacy is left on the face of the earth
and nothing lifts to the skies.

And there is a way of life
that leads surely to death of another kind.
Today, my child, gathering around you
a host of witnesses watched as the heavens were torn
open
and a silent voice shouted
she's alive!

And, also today, in a way
I died.
For the Owner of The Vineyard
came home to rest
and take to his breast all that is rightfully His.
His cup bearer and steward
for sixteen years
He entrusted you to me and to your mother
A greater gift I have never known

Oh daughter of mine!
greater to me than any son could ever be
except the one who died
the Son of the Owner of The Vineyard
He, a father, too
lost his son for you.
His soul is full of sorrow
and yet throughout His tears
He's not forgotten you.
And today, today of all days
we killed the fatted calf for,
He's not forgotten you.
You see His journey was always to return
and claim you
my daughter
as His daughter
and His bride.

So today
my Child
know that death will never touch you
Oh, you'll know the pain and
sorrow, too
And it will take your breath away
But you will never die.
So, Talitha Kum
Arise!

Therefore from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh...Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. (2 Cor 5:16-17)

May God grant us the grace to allow our children, both physical and spiritual, the freedom to go. Amen.

1. Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1997), 176.
2. Translation of Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 289.
3. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 195.
4. Gundry, *Mark*, 292.
5. Cranfield, *Mark*, 200-201.

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THE FINAL SOLUTION, OR IS IT?

Catalog No. 1118

Mark 6:14-29

17th Message

Brian Morgan

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In our studies in the gospel of Mark, we have noted the repeated theme of the rejection of Jesus and his ministry, a rejection that intensified in each of three scenes. In the first scene, Jesus returned to his home town of Nazareth. There, his family, using only the lens of family origin and occupation, was unable to enter into anything of who he was or what he had accomplished. This was a painful rejection for Jesus, but coupled with it was his sense of amazement at their unbelief. In the aftermath, he commissioned the twelve and sent them out to multiply his work and mission, with his full authority. Just as he himself had received a dual reception in Israel, so he prepared them for the same. Like him, they would not be immune to rejection in their announcement of the kingdom of God.

Today we come to the climactic third scene, which is a flashback to Herod's treatment of Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, and his gruesome execution. This is a sordid story of evil in its rawest form, driven by lewd pleasure and naked ambition. I feel tempted to skip this account, especially on graduation Sunday, but it too is part of the sacred story; thus we must enter into it and stare evil in the face and be shocked by it. We can judge the impact of this account on the disciples by the amount of space which Mark devotes to it. He carefully places it here to prepare them for the ultimate rejection Jesus would face from the leadership of Israel and Rome. So we cannot skip this aspect of our spiritual education. Understanding how the kingdom of God interfaces with rulers and authorities who are hell-bent on its annihilation is a critical part of our maturity as Christians. No spiritual training is adequate unless it prepares us for the worst, and identifies where hope is found when darkness reigns.

Our story begins with the news of Jesus' fame spreading into the royal press corps, provoking a strong reaction from King Herod.

I. Herod's Paranoia over Jesus' fame (6:14-16)

And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him." But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!" (NASB)

As Jesus' fame spreads to the royal palace, everyone

seems to be grappling with his identity in the face of his amazing miracles. Some say he was Elijah, Israel's ancient worker of miracles. Elijah was sent to reform the nation from the reign of terror of Ahab and Jezebel, when Baal-worship became the official state religion. Malachi had predicted that Elijah would return to be the forerunner to prepare the way for the Messiah—an event for which many Jews today are still waiting. Yet others identified Jesus as one of the prophets.

Each view had a degree of truth associated with it, but the more Jesus' fame spreads, the more distorted the interpretation becomes. Jesus was a prophet, yes, but he was more than that. Furthermore, his ministry closely paralleled Elijah's in kind. But, according to Jesus, the Elijah for whom Israel was waiting had come in the person of John the Baptist (Mark 9:11-13).

Mark records that of all the reactions provoked by Jesus' reputation, no one expressed more amazement than Herod. The Herod referred to here is "Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and Malthace, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from his father's death in 4 B.C. till A.D. 39."¹ Mark refers to him as "King Herod." This seems a bit ironic, because it was this man's ambition to gain this title that officially led to his downfall (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.240-56). When Herod got wind of what was happening in his district of Galilee, he was deeply alarmed. Through the lens of a guilty conscience, he thought that John, whom he had earlier beheaded, had come back from the dead in the person of Jesus, and this explained why he was able to work such wonders, far greater than anything he had done prior to his execution.² This serves to highlight the fact that so powerful were Jesus works, "that even the king who had John beheaded thinks that Jesus is this same John risen."³

Mark uses this mention of John as the opportunity to give the details of his execution at the hands of Herod.

II. Herod's Arrest of John (6:17-20)

For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy

listening to him.

Here is an immoral king who, although he has a sense for what is right, is ruled by the fears and opinions of others. Herod had unlawfully taken his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, as his own. Things become even more complicated when we learn that "Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus, the son of Herod the Great and Mariamne, and so the niece of Herod Antipas."⁴ To Herod's surprise, the affair would not go unchallenged. He was denounced by the revolutionary prophet, John the Baptist, who carried much weight in Israel. John Calvin applauds this outstanding characteristic in John: "We behold in John an illustrious example of that moral courage, which all pious teachers ought to possess, not to hesitate to incur the wrath of the great and powerful, as often as it may be found necessary: for he, with whom there is acceptance of persons, does not honestly serve God."⁵ And, as history records, most prophets in Israel did not fare well when they confronted a king with his sins.

In response, Herod acts decisively, arresting John and placing him in prison. Josephus tells us "Accordingly, he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Machaerus, the castle I before mentioned and was there put to death" (*Ant.* 5.2). This Machaerus was in the southernmost part of Perea, to the east of the Dead Sea. "Archaeological discoveries of a prison as well as a palace there, and of two dining rooms (*triclinia*), one large and one small, fit John's imprisonment, Herod's banquet, and the separateness of Herod and Herodias during the banquet, presumably because the men were eating in the large dining room, the women in the small one."⁶

It's not clear whether the impetus to arrest John came from Herodias. What is obvious, however, is that she felt her husband did not go far enough. But Herod was afraid of John. He knew he was a righteous man, and he loved to hear him preach the announcement of the coming kingdom of God. So imprisonment became a way for Herod to keep John safe from execution. But Herodias was not satisfied with imprisonment; she wanted John dead. On Herod's birthday, the opportune time presented itself.

III. Herod Parties and Salome Dances (6:21-23)

And a strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." And he swore much to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom."

Herod hosts a huge birthday party for himself and invites all the courtiers, the top ranking military officers and leading Galilean provincials. This seems an august

group, but on closer examination, we discover it was really a stag party, with no women present, except the ones who performed. Amazingly, the young princess enters, the very daughter of Herodias, and dances like a paid harlot. Some scholars think she was as young as 12 or 13, because of the word "little girl" used to describe her, in v. 28. Her risqué dance brings the house down. Fueled by lust and the perverted pride of the moment, Herod seeks to seal this festival of family perversion with a rash vow: "Ask me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." Then he stumbles all over his words, repeating himself vociferously (seen in the Greek word "much" and the plural form of "oaths," in v. 26). This was likely due to the fact that he was drunk. "Up to half of my kingdom!" he drunkenly exclaims. All eyes are focused on this young girl who now has been given a blank check for her dreams.

But before a word is spoken, she leaves the all-male hall as surprisingly as she entered it.

IV. Salome's request: The head of John the Baptist (6:24-29)

And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." And immediately she came in haste before the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me right away the head of John the Baptist on a platter." (6:24-25)

Now we learn the mastermind of the moment: it is her mother. Seizing the stage of Herod's self-indulgent birthday party, and sacrificing her daughter's purity and respectability, Herodias has won Herod's favor and placed him in just the right frame of mind to suit her purpose. "What shall I ask for?" inquires the daughter. "The head of John the Baptist," is her mother's response. Without even a word of objection or a semblance of horror (she might just as well be asking for a pony), the girl instantly obeys. Quickly returning to the hall, and before the gazing eyes of the drunken guests, she adds a word of haste to the request, "I want you to give me right away the head of John the Baptist." Then, despicably, she adds her own words, "on a platter." Like mother, like daughter. The urgency of her request is designed to accomplish the vile deed before Herod sobers up and comes to his senses.⁷

And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. And immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. (6:26-28)

Herod gasps at the portent of his daughter's words. His reckless gaiety quickly evaporates into deep sorrow. However, he is not man enough to be ruled by his convictions. Instead, the prospect of losing face before

his guests and having to say no to his daughter overrules his sense of what is right. The weight of the moment presses upon him so heavily that, even as king of the land, he cannot buy a moment's time to consult his own conscience; and so he caves in, agreeing to her request. What a sordid scene, as the "king" of Israel, a pawn of sensuality, caves in to his wife's lurid ambition, in front the leading men of his kingdom. The order is given, and an executioner is sent for. In the breath of a moment, sudden and swift, the deed is done. The bloody head of John the Baptist is brought on a platter and given to the girl. She carries it to her mother, who receives it as her waiting crown. John, Israel's greatest prophet, who came to anoint Israel's final King, is decapitated as a party favor for a 12-year old girl. It is too horrific for words.

But Herod doesn't have the final word, nor does his vile palace become John's final resting place. Verse 29:

And when his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb. (6:29)

Some disciples who loved John come and, at great risk to their own lives, acquire his body and prepare it for burial. Our story ends with John's body lying in a tomb, awaiting vindication from the only One who can give it. Herod never got over John. Though his body was dismembered and buried, his memory lived on to invade the king's subconscious and assail him in his dreams every night. Even when the report came of a prophet in Galilee doing all kinds of miracles, all Herod's guilty conscience could think was, "It must be John the Baptist, risen from the dead!"

Why does Mark place such a lurid tale in the middle of the gospel story? Why does he care to show us this perverted family affair? Why does he want us to stare such evil in the face?

V. Implications of our story

A. Looking back to the story of Esther

My desire is to make you sensitive to the shape of Biblical stories so that as you are drawn into them, you will not only feel their power, you will be sensitive to the shape God is giving your life, which is a story that is as holy as these gospels. Like any scene in a good story, this tale derives its power both by what has preceded it and what follows. Upon hearing this story, a sensitive Jew could not help but hear echoes of another ancient story, in which, once again at a royal banquet, a drunken king made a vow to a beautiful young woman, promising her up to half his kingdom.

The story of Esther begins with King Ahasuerus giving a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media. After much drinking, the king requests his Queen, Vashti, to show off her beauty before the gazing eyes. But she refuses, which is an insult to the king. For shaming not only him but all the princes and all the peoples, she is dismissed, and Esther is made Queen in her place. But then, through a

turn of events, Esther learns that the evil Haman has used his power to have the king enact a decree "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to seize their possessions as plunder" (3:13). This is a foretaste of Hitler's "Final Solution"—the annihilation of the Jewish race.

In response to this horrific threat, Esther holds another royal banquet, and uses her beauty to win the favor of King Ahasuerus. He, captivated by her beauty and purity, makes a vow, promising her up to half his kingdom (like Herod, he reiterates it, 5:3, 6; 7:2). But, rather than making a personal request, she uses her favored position to risk her life to save her people: "Let my life be given me as my petition, and my people as my request; for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated" (7:3-4). When the drunken king finds out who the culprit is, Haman is quickly executed (7:10). Then a new decree is given, that the Jews have the right "to assemble and to defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate the entire army of any people or province which might attack them" (8:11). A holiday was then decreed, the Feast of Purim, celebrating the miraculous survival of the Jewish race from annihilation. As successive generations re-enact the story of the joy of Purim, Esther's courage is inscribed into the soul of every Jew.

With this background, the story of John the Baptist's death becomes even more horrific. It is much more than a mere case of isolated evil. At first reading, we are appalled by a king's immorality and lust, a queen's raw ambition which sacrifices her daughter's purity, and a daughter who doesn't even flinch at the thought of decapitating a prophet for a door prize. But when it is seen against the backdrop of Esther, a story of salvation is subverted to destruction, and the framework of our universe is shattered. Instead of Jews arming and defending themselves, evil is allowed to exhaust itself upon a righteous prophet. And so the reader must ask, "Where was God to protect Israel's final prophet, the new Elijah. Will the feast of Purim be undone? Will God's people be annihilated in the paradigm of the new kingdom?"

B. Preparation for the cross of Jesus

Mark doesn't answer these questions yet. They are designed to go deep into the reader and to prepare him for what is to come later in the story. At the climax of the gospel, Jesus enters Jerusalem and, like John, is seized (6:17; 14:46). His execution is likewise *delayed* because of the fear of those in power (6:20; 11:18, 32; 12:12; 14:2), until the *opportune* time (14:11), and then it appears that evil exhausts itself upon this prophet. John is decapitated as a door prize, and Jesus is crucified as sport by the Romans. Like John, his body is acquired by a disciple who, at great risk to himself, lays it in a tomb. By Mark having us live through this story, the cross provokes much more emotion and grief in us, for we

have already lived through it once.

Thus our consummate sorrow is fully lanced. But our grief intensifies even more when it dawns on us that it was our lurid sin that crucified our Lord. So now the shock and violent horror of sin fall upon us with its full weight.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) captured the thought well in the poem:

Infinite grief! amazing woe!
Behold my bleeding Lord;
Hell and the Jew conspired his death,
And used the Roman sword.

Oh the sharp pangs of smarting pain
My dear Redeemer bore,
When knotty whips, and ragged thorns
His sacred body tore!

But knotty whips and ragged thorns
In vain do I accuse,
In vain I blame the Roman bands,
And the more spiteful Jews.

'Twere you, my sins, my cruel sins,
His chief tormentors were;
Each of my crimes became a nail,
And unbelief the spear.

'Twere you that pulled the vengeance down
Upon his guiltless head:
Break, break my heart, oh burst mine eyes,
And let my sorrows bleed.

Strike, mighty Grace, my flinty soul
Till melting waters flow,
And deep repentance drown mine eyes
In undissembled woe.

C. A vision of new hope

Thus we come face to face with evil, and we grieve. But we are also forced to grapple with the ultimate question: Doesn't God have the last word, as he did in the story of Esther? Or has that moral framework that holds our universe together been shattered? The story gives its clues, for it ends not with Herod, Salome, or Herodias, but with the decapitated body of John being handled only by those who loved him, and being placed in a tomb, awaiting vindication. And the memory of John lives to haunt Herod, so that when he hears about the miracles of Jesus, he exclaims, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!" Yes, there is a new paradigm for the kingdom of God. We are not given arms to defend ourselves by destroying our enemies, but in the path of the Suffering Servant, we are given the role of absorbing evil. In some cases, like Stephen, in the book of Acts, that will involve martyrdom. At about the time this gospel went to press (in the early 60's A.D.), Peter was crucified. But our hope in that darkest hour when evil reigns is in the resurrection, one which vindicates the victim in heaven and multiplies the kingdom on earth. This is our true hope.

I am reminded of my friend's poem to his 16-year old daughter upon her baptism,

Oh you will know pain and sorrow,
and it will take your breath away
but you will never die.

1. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 206.

2. Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 303.

3. Gundry, *Mark*, 305.

4. Cranfield, *Mark*, 209.

5. Cranfield, *Mark*, 209.

6. Gundry, *Mark*, 313

7. Gundry, *Mark*, 321.

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BREAD FROM HEAVEN

Catalog No. 1119

Mark 6:30-44

18th Message

Brian Morgan

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In the aftermath of the recent tragic events of our world, a number of people have asked us to address the issue of the mystery of suffering. Many are asking such questions as: Why does God allow innocent people to be overrun by evil? and, How do we reconcile the sovereignty of God with the justice and goodness of God?

Let me respond by making three observations. First, questions like these are appropriate and valid. God takes them seriously. In the midst of my own suffering I have asked them myself. Second, when the world of our forefathers in the faith, Job and Jeremiah, collapsed, they too wrestled with these questions. As they struggled to understand these issues they grew spiritually, becoming more human in the process. And third, despite their arduous and agonizing wrestlings with God they did not receive philosophical answers. What they received instead was a personal encounter which transcended their pain and allowed them to live with the mystery. Thus Job's story ends with the words, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You" (Job 42:5). The encounter was enough.

In like manner, Isaiah's prophetic word came to a tiny, war-torn remnant of grieving exiles who had been forced from their land. The prophet promised them a holy encounter so wonderful that he described it in terms of a "new exodus": "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Isa 43:2). "Do not fear, for I am with you" (Isa 43:5). At times the chaotic waters of evil may leave their banks and seek to drown us but, just as in the first exodus, God, the great "I AM," will descend to be with us. In his presence we have nothing to fear, not even death itself. This is what we need to hear in the midst of our suffering, not a philosophical response that removes the mystery, but a divine encounter that transcends it.

The message of the New Testament is that Israel's long awaited exile is over and the new exodus has arrived in Jesus. And, just as in the Old Testament, the gospel stories don't give a philosophical answer to the mystery of evil. What they do instead is announce that in Jesus the door is now thrown wide open to enable mankind to encounter the Creator of the universe. In these intimate meetings he restores our brokenness and makes us thoroughly human again, even in the midst of a violent world. This is the message of the gospel.

In this light, we resume our studies this morning in the book of Mark. Today and in the coming weeks we will be looking at how the disciples encountered this di-

vine mystery in one of the most basic acts of life, that of eating a meal. This theme of eating dominates Mark's text from 6:14 through 8:21. It has its origins in the garden of Eden. It was re-taught to Israel in the wilderness in the giving of manna; it was replayed in the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness; and now in Mark's gospel it becomes a primary lesson for the disciples of Jesus in understanding the nature of the kingdom of God.

Today's text follows immediately after Mark's report of the beheading of John the Baptist. In that graphic account we were forced to gaze upon Israel's greatest and final prophet who was not protected from the vilest evil. Following John's execution, the decapitated head of the forerunner of Jesus was served on a platter, as if it were the main course for the guests at a royal banquet. Even more horrifying is the fact that John's bloody head was presented to Herod in triumph, without a semblance of horror, by a teenage girl—his own daughter.

Before we can recover from the shock and grief of this event, Mark transports us to another banquet, the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. Our text opens with the return of the disciples from their apostolic mission throughout the cities of Israel announcing the kingdom of God.

I. The Invitation (6:30-32)

And the apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. (NASB)

The disciples return and report to Jesus everything they had taught about the kingdom of God and how they had cast out demons and healed many. Jesus, aware that they are spent and in need of refreshment, invites them on a quiet retreat. There they would escape the multitudes pressing in on them from every side, a rush that made it virtually impossible to attend to their most basic needs, even things like eating. So Jesus and his disciples embark in a small boat and head off to a deserted place to be alone. They are looking forward to a time of rest and solitude.

But, like many things in life, their plans are short lived. Verses 33-34:

II. The Teaching (6:33-34)

And the people saw them going, and many recognized them, and they ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them. And [when He went ashore], He saw a great multitude, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them [at length].

It is hard for the little band to escape unnoticed. As they depart, everyone recognizes them and wants to be part of the group, so the crowds run on foot from all the surrounding cities to join them. When their boat arrives at the “lonely place,” rather than being greeted by solitude, no small city awaits them.

Mark notes Jesus’ reaction the moment he sees the throng. We are not told how the disciples felt. There is no need to ask. Between the twelve there was a wide range of emotions: disappointment, frustration, and anger, no doubt. But it was not so with Jesus. Mark says, “He felt compassion for them for they were like sheep without a shepherd.” They had no shepherd to care, protect or feed them. “Compassion”¹ is a strong word that speaks of a gut-wrenching sympathy that moves one to action. Usually it is used in terms that are closely related to words used for pain and crying. The greatest need of any flock is to be taught, and this is what Jesus does, and at great length, far into the day.² His compassion drives him to forget about his physical hunger and tiredness as he gives himself away with total abandon.

III. The Feeding (6:35-44)

And when it was already quite late, His disciples came up to Him and began saying, “The place is desolate and it is already quite late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” But He answered and said to them, “You give them something to eat!” And they said to Him, “Shall we go and spend two hundred denarii on bread and give them something to eat?” And He said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go look!” And when they found out, they said, “Five and two fish.” And He commanded them all to recline by groups on the green grass. And they reclined in companies of hundreds and of fifties. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food and broke the loaves and He kept giving them to the disciples to set before them; and He divided up the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they picked up twelve full baskets of the broken pieces, and also of the fish. And there were five thousand men who ate the loaves.

The hours march on. Morning gives way to noon, and noon to afternoon. Finally, before sunset, the topic of hunger resurfaces, the same issue which Mark introduced in verse 31. The disciples, perhaps now with no

little impatience over their unmet expectations, try to spur Jesus into action. They say: “Allow the people to leave while the market place is still open so that they might refresh themselves with something to eat.” It’s strange that the crowds don’t seem to notice either the passage of time or their hunger, and neither does Jesus.

His response to the disciples surprises us as much as it must have surprised them: “You give them something to eat!” In light of their meager resources, the thought seems ludicrous to them. In fact, by their calculation it would require about eight months’ wages³ to buy even enough bread for all the wandering refugees. Undeterred, Jesus forces them to consider what lies at hand. With an even more forceful, “Go look,” ringing in their ears, they discover they have five loaves of bread and two fish. With these resources, Jesus commands the throng to recline in groups on the green grass, in companies of hundreds and fifties, “just as their forefathers were used to doing on their journey through the Sinai desert (cf. Exod 18:25).”⁴ And, as was the Jewish custom (based on Lev 19:24 and Deut 8:10) as head of this new family, he took the bread into his hands and, looking up to heaven, blessed God, saying,

“Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

The ancient Hebrew blessing had been repeated for generations, but now as it is uttered by Jesus, something radically new occurs. As he breaks the bread he keeps giving it to the disciples, together with the fish, and they distribute the never ending supply until five thousand men are fully satisfied.⁵

But the miracle does not end there. When they had picked up the remainder of the five loaves and placed them in large wicker baskets, they found they had twelve baskets in all, one for each apostle. This was no arbitrary number. It signified the feeding the twelve tribes of this newly constituted Israel in the wilderness. As Bargil Pixner writes: “Everything in this report: the site, the placing of the groups and in particular the number of the twelve baskets...points towards the fact that this feeding was meant for the twelve tribes of Israel.”⁶

This is very significant, since the Jews felt that after the exile, God would send a new shepherd, like Moses, who would feed his people. Listen to Ezekiel’s description of this coming one:

“My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth; and there was no one to search or seek for them...Behold, I myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among this scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them...and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel...and they will feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest.” (Ezek 34:6-16)

The Jewish inter-testamental writings, as in 2 Baruch

29:8, take the images even farther: “And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it those years because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time.” When would that be? Mark says the time was now! Israel’s hopes were now being realized. The Messianic age when God would raise up a shepherd to feed his flock with compassion had arrived. Jesus was the new Moses who fed Israel manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16); the new David who took five loaves and fed his army in the wilderness (1 Samuel 21); the new Elisha who fed his school of prophets twenty loaves and had some left over (2 Kgs 4:42-44).

It is very important to understand that Jesus’ miracles were not arbitrary acts of wonder. These events were deeply imbedded in Israel’s story. The reason for this is that God raised up Israel from Abraham to be the “new Adam” to restore our lost humanity. But Israel failed, just as Adam had failed. As Adam was exiled from the garden, so Israel was exiled from her land to await full restoration. Now Jesus is taking upon himself Israel’s role, and fulfilling Israel’s hopes and dreams by creating a new Adam (Rom 5:14) and a new humanity (Eph 2:15). Isn’t that what we need in the midst of our evil world—someone to make us human again?

So what did this feast in the wilderness teach the disciples of Jesus? And what does it teach Christians today about what it means to be human? In a word, hospitality. The highest calling of our humanity is to invite others and serve them at this feast. As we are attentive to Jesus in this story we discover three things: First, what motivates us to serve; second, what we serve at the feast; and third, when and where can we expect this feast to take place.

IV. Will You Serve at this Feast?

A. What motivates us to serve?

Notice that it was compassion that moved Jesus to forget about himself and serve others. A gut-wrenching sympathy drove him into action. He was teaching his disciples that being human means to be consumed with a divine compassion that overrides our natural appetites so that we love with abandon.

The new humanity lives to feed others, not themselves, and miraculously trusts God to feed them through the very means by which they feed others, making every meal a divine encounter. As the new Adam, Jesus himself received such training early in his ministry. After he was overcome with physical hunger in the wilderness he was tempted by the devil to “turn these stones into bread,” implying that if he was to be the new Moses, then he must do what Moses did and bring forth manna from stones. The subtle temptation was that Jesus use his office to feed himself. But he refused, saying, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Deut 8:3). Then, when the devil had left him, the angels

came and “ministered to him.” This is the same term used in Acts 6 of serving tables; literally, they “served him” heavenly food.

This lesson would become essential for the apostles. At the end of John’s gospel we find Peter back at his old trade of fishing, attempting to feed himself. But on the shore stands Jesus, who has already prepared breakfast for him. During that holy meal, Jesus emphatically reminds him that if he truly loves him, he is not to feed himself, but “feed my sheep.” Jesus was saying, “You feed my sheep and I’ll feed you.” How radically different this is from the spirit of the age that we encounter in Silicon Valley!

This leads us to a second question: What do we feed them?

B. What do we serve at this feast?

Notice that there were two feedings here. First, Jesus fed the people from the word of God, then he had the disciples feed them bread from heaven. I wonder if in fact Jesus actually had the disciples act out physically what he had just done spiritually. One was a feast in fact, the other in symbol. Together they make up the true feast, which is the word of Christ and the body of Christ. That is what satisfied them. Let us never forget that. When people are starving we must not feed them the opinions of men, the banter of the talk shows or the whirlwind of media chatter. And we must not entertain them. We must give them the simple, unadulterated word of God. That is what satisfies.

Around this time last year when I was weary and in need of rest, our board of elders graciously allowed me to take a sabbatical from preaching for the past eight months. During that time I felt it necessary to get back to basics to restore my soul and feed my spirit. I discovered that two little things did more for my renewal than anything else. The first was taking time each morning to read and meditate on one psalm. One psalm, a small meal, satisfied me for an entire day.⁷ The second thing I did was take communion often. Taking time to have communion with family and friends anytime and anywhere created some wonderful memories of intimacy. This is the true feast, the word of Christ and the body of Christ.

C. When and where can we expect this feast to occur?

This wondrous feeding of a second Exodus did not come about according to the predetermined plans of men, nor did it occur on the artificial stages of the world. It happened in the isolation of the desert, in response to a divine interruption, and at a time where the disciples had few resources and were at their physical end. That is the time and place when we are most likely to hear the voice of Jesus saying to us, “Feed them.” The best news is that Jesus allowed the disciples to do no fund raising; instead they used the meager resources at hand. And in amazing simplicity, with the blessing of Jesus, in the giving of the bread and in the hearing of the word, physical hunger abated, time stood still, and

that tiny hill became awash with heaven. This happens again and again.

A good friend who is a gifted pastor-evangelist had been planning a much needed vacation with his wife, but some weeks ago he wrote me to say she had taken ill and they had to cancel their plans. He was pained and disappointed. On a recent Tuesday morning, around the time when they had planned to leave, he saw about twenty police cars rushing by his office. He got in his car and came upon the tragic scene at Columbine High School. Overcome with compassion, he gave of himself with abandon at the scene. His church threw open its doors to the Denver community. At first, eight hundred, then a thousand people came to pray. On the following Sunday, twenty-five hundred attended services. At the first memorial service for one of the victims, John Tomlin, five high schoolers received Christ. Then the church opened their larger facilities to the local Methodist church, and a high school teacher shared the love of Christ. Today is youth Sunday at their church. No one knows how many young people they will feed today. Bill wrote: "Pray for us. We're all weary and exhausted. Sleep is hard to come by. Eating habits are disrupted. We're a community of grieving shepherds, but we know that God is with us. We want to continue to present his message with power and conviction."

On a larger scale, think of the multitude who have been fed with eternal life by the testimony of twelve young martyrs and one teacher in Littleton. Perhaps a whole nation. Cassie Bernall gave testimony to her faith just before she was shot. My friend wrote that a hundred students received Christ at her memorial service. According to the *Boston Globe*, on the night of her death, Cassie's brother Chris found this poem which she had written just two days prior to her death:

Now I have given up on everything else
I have found it to be the only way
To really know Christ and to experience
The mighty power that brought
Him back to life again, and to find
Out what it means to suffer and to
Die with him. So, whatever it takes
I will be one who lives in the fresh
Newness of life of those who are
Alive from the dead.⁸

I don't understand the mystery of evil. I don't understand the death of these twelve students, the plight of the refugees in Kosovo, or the death of John the Baptist. But I do know that in Christ there is a heavenly feast, and the world is very hungry. The only question is, Will compassion move us to feed them?

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1. C. E. B. Cranfield (*The Gospel according to St Mark* [Cambridge University Press, 1959] 216) notes that in the NT, *splagchnizomai* is used only of Jesus, apart from three occasions on which it occurs on his lips with reference to figures in parables that have a close connection with himself.

2. Cranfield, 217, notes that the "many things" Jesus taught them more than likely adverbially means "at length": "the meaning is not that Jesus taught them a great number of different things, but that he taught the one message of the kingdom of God persistently."

3. Cranfield, 217, notes that "a denarius is the wage for a day's work in a vineyard."

4. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 71.

5. Cranfield, 220, notes that Mark's choice of words makes this note emphatic in the text and notes also Ruth 2:14; 2 Kgs 4:44; 2 Chron 31:10.

6. Pixner, 72.

7. I supplemented my reading of the Psalms with Derek Kidner's *Commentary on the Psalms* (IVP). Kidner's work is outstanding. Each sentence is carefully composed as if it were poetry.

8. Quoted from Chuck Colson, Prison Fellowship Ministries, 1999.



FOOTSTEPS ON THE SEA

Catalog No. 1120

Mark 6:45-56

19th Message

Brian Morgan

May 9th, 1999

A couple of my close friends have had more than their share of suffering. At times, as they try to cope with their sorrow, they will ask me, "Where is God? He seems so absent." As a pastor I find this question hard to answer. Following his wife's death, C.S. Lewis wrote in *A Grief Observed* that sometimes when a desperate need drives you to seek God and knock at his door, the door seems slammed in your face and all you hear is silence. The longer you wait, the more emphatic is the silence. Finally, you look up and see that there are no lights in the window. The house is empty.¹ That is sacred honesty.

In the late 1500's, a Spanish monk, St. John of the Cross, wrote several treatises to train disciples in their journey to learn to know God. His most famous has become the classic *Dark Night of the Soul*. He held that there are occasions in every believer's life when God appears to turn away his face and to our dismay becomes surprisingly absent. Have you been through such a dark night? It was St. John's strong conviction that such times are absolutely necessary for our spiritual development.

Our text this morning from the gospel of Mark catapults us into a dark night experienced by the disciples of Jesus following the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. In Mark's cryptic way he reveals much about the mystery of such a night, its necessity for spiritual growth, and its benefits upon the soul.

I. Terror at Sea (6:45-52)

A. An Urgent Dismissal (6:45-46)

And immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the multitude away. And after bidding them farewell, He departed to the mountain to pray. (NASB)

The disciples have just completed the feeding of five thousand men with but five loaves and two fish. Now a sense of urgency comes over Jesus, and with a certain force he "compels" his disciples to quickly leave by boat for Bethsaida, on the opposite shore, the eastern side of the lake. Robert Gundry makes the point that the verb is so strong it implies that he did it against their will.² Time was critical. In his gospel John writes that the people were eager to make him king: "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, knowing they intended to come and

make him king by force, withdrew to a mountain by himself" (John 6:14-15).

Such a messianic upsurge would not sit well with the political authorities. Bargil Pixner comments:

This messianic upsurge was exactly what he wished to avoid. Herod, who in his palace in Tiberias lived within sight of the place of the feeding, certainly had spies among the crowd... [Jesus] had to get his disciples into safety: "Get yourselves into the boats at once! Here we are in danger. Sail to the other side of the Jordan to the tetrarchy of Philip to Bethsaida. There wait for me!" He did not worry about his own safety: "He dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up to the mountainside to pray."³

Pixner gives an accurate picture of the historical and political forces at play. But I feel Jesus separated himself from his disciples for another reason. I think he knew it was necessary to put some distance between them so that they might experience life without him on the turbulent sea. Then they might come to a better frame of mind to understand who he was.

So Jesus left them, and as they set out to sea, he headed up to the mountain to pray. The sight is still well preserved. Pixner's description captures its breathtaking beauty: "The mountain where he preferred to stay time and again rose above the springs of Magadan. At the southern end, facing the lake, there is a grotto below a hanging cliff (known as the *Eremos* cave...) where Jesus could find shelter during his night prayers."⁴ From that high vantage point Jesus prayed to the Father, in full view of his disciples.

B. Footprints in the Sea (6:47-48)

And when it was evening, the boat was in the midst of the sea, and He was alone on the land. And seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night, He came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them.

It was a dark night for the disciples. Pixner writes: "That particular night a cold east wind suddenly sprang up, the *Sharkiyeh*, dreaded by the fishermen. At the end of winter it can become particularly severe, endangering people on the lake. It becomes impossible to sail or row against that wind."⁵ But notice that although Jesus was not physically present with his disciples he never lost sight of them, nor did he cease to pray for them. What a beautiful sight. Our Lord alone in a cave, over-

looking the turbulent sea, praying for those whom he loved.

What was he praying for? It's clear that he was praying, as the apostle Paul wrote, "for the eyes of their hearts to be enlightened" (cf. Eph 1:18). He was praying that they might come to know who he was. Throughout Mark's gospel we have seen how Jesus has been revealing himself to the disciples by means of miracles. In the previous feeding he had shown himself to be the one who was uniquely inaugurating "Isaiah's new Exodus" (Rikki Watts), and Israel's Messianic shepherd who had come to feed Israel (Ezekiel 34), just as Moses, David and Elijah had done. Now in his absence he was praying that they might understand this.

But before the disciples could grasp the secret there had to be some distance created between them. So Jesus watches through the dark night. The first watch passes, gives way to the second, and the third, and finally, by the fourth watch⁶ (between 3 and 6 a.m.), Jesus' penetrating vision sees their desperate plight.⁷ After an entire night of rowing they are still in the middle of the lake, having made no progress. In fact, with the prevailing winds against them they are being blown backwards. What a telling metaphor for our human plight! Without Jesus in our boat we make no progress. Yet Jesus does not intervene too soon lest we fail to make the necessary self-discovery that without him we are helpless.

And now that the disciples are in that frame of mind, it's time to build on what Jesus has taught them. It's time for graduate school, time to reveal his greatest secret as Messianic king: Jesus comes to them, walking upon the water. The one who had previously commanded the sea now walks on it. What is surprising is the expression, "He wished to *pass by* them." If they are in such dire need and he has come to rescue them, why would he want to "pass by them"?

Once again, an understanding of the Old Testament background provides the key. Robert Gundry observes that this verb "'*passing by*' (*parerchomai*) indicates a parade of divinity such as characterized OT theophanies (see Exod 33:19, 22; 34:5-6; 1 Kgs 19:11...)." ⁸ We find it on the occasion when God wanted to reveal himself to Moses in the cleft of the rock:

"Behold there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is *passing by*, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have *passed by*. Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen." (Exod 33:21-23)

To Elijah on that same mountain, God said:

"Go forth, and stand on the mountain before the Lord." And behold, the Lord was *passing by*! ...not in the wind...not in the earthquake...not in the fire [but in] a sound of gentle blowing." (1 Kgs 19:11-12)

In this instance it is the disciples who are privileged with an appearance of God. In the Hebrew Scriptures it was God alone who walked on and trampled down the waves (Job 9:8; 38:16; Psa 77:19), as it is written:

**"Who alone stretches out the heavens,
And tramples down the waves of the sea." (Job 9:8)**

**"Your way was in the sea,
And your paths in the mighty waters,
And your footprints may not be known." (Psalm 77:19)**

Now it is Jesus who is walking on the water. In "passing by" the disciples he is giving them an "epiphany" of Yahweh, whose presence has come to save them in Jesus. Here is the most amazing secret of the gospel. As Rikki Watts writes: "For Mark, Jesus appears not only to be both Messiah and the true son of God (i.e., true Israel) but also the Son of God (cf. 1:1, 24; 3:11; 5:7; 15:39; Mt 14:33). Yahweh has, in a unique way, 'come down' among his people to save them (Mark 1:10, cf. Isaiah 59:15b-20; 63:1-5, 19)."⁹

C. Astonishment in the Boat (6:49-52)

But when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed that it was a ghost, and cried out; for they all saw Him and were frightened. But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, "Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid." And He got into the boat with them, and the wind stopped; and they were greatly astonished, for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened.

But, seeing him, the disciples are terror stricken, as if they had seen a ghost. The word "frightened" is used only in this instance in Mark's gospel, but in other places in the New Testament it means to shake up, to throw into convulsions, to be terrified. Yet God who had promised a new exodus in Isaiah said: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...do not fear, for I am with you." (Isa 43:16) Now it is Jesus who tramples down the waves, and upon entering their chaotic world calms them with his voice, using those same words. The simple "*I am*" (the divine name "*Yahweh*") puts everything at rest. Surrounded by a peaceful calm, the disciples are overcome with amazement (cf. Psa 107:28-29).

But, painfully, the rest given to the sea and the quiet bestowed on the prevailing winds does not penetrate the souls of the disciples. They can't make a connection. Mark notes they had not been perceptive about the miracle of the loaves, although they were carrying twelve baskets of leftovers in their little boat; therefore they missed this divine encounter. Here the disciples are so privileged to be in the place of Moses and Elijah, to see the Exodus relived, with Yahweh walking on the sea in the person of Jesus; but alas, it is all wasted on them. Sadly, these twelve are just like the old Israel: their hearts are hardened (cf. Isa 6:9; Jer 5:21). We can hear Ezekiel's words resonating afresh: "Son of man, you

live in the midst of the rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear; for they are a rebellious house” (Ezek 12:2). Jesus can see them, but they can’t see him (“see” is a key word in our text). And we are left wondering if Israel’s story, now retold in Jesus, will end with the same failure to restore our humanity and redeem the world.

But in God’s tenacious loyalty the story continues. Undeterred, Jesus keeps giving these disciples more lessons, as the stage shifts from sea to land.

II. Faith on Land (6:53-56)

And when they had crossed over they came to land at Gennesaret, and moored to the shore. And when they had come out of the boat, immediately the people recognized Him, and ran about that whole country and began to carry about on their pallets those who were sick, to the place they heard He was. And wherever He entered villages, or cities, or countryside, they were laying the sick in the market places, and entreating Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched it were being cured.

There are three things to note in Mark’s short report. First, where the disciples finally land; second, the faith of the crowd; and third, the impact of Jesus.

A. The Regress of the Disciples

After a harrowing night, the disciples, with Jesus’ intervention, finally beach their boat. Interestingly, the place is Gennesaret, a plain southwest of Capernaum, far from their original destination, Bethsaida, which lies on the northeast side of the lake. Left to themselves, not only did the disciples make no progress against the contrary winds, they went backwards. And so the political danger remains. Rather than being safely out of reach of the Roman authorities on the eastern side of the lake, they are back on the western side, within Herod’s view. Their navigational failure may well serve as a metaphor for their spiritual progress. After a dark night on their own they have not progressed but regressed.

B. The Faith of the Crowd

Secondly, once they have landed safely, Mark contrasts their hard hearts with the fervent faith of the crowds. While the disciples seem blinded by revelation and paralyzed in fear, the crowds appear very adept at recognition and are “*running*” in their faith. If the disciples are ill prepared for the present because of past failure and hard hearts, that is not the case with the common people. They are hearing, running, broadcasting, bringing, beseeching, and in the language of Mark, “*being saved*.” What fueled such faith? The answer seems to be the two stories of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12) and of the hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:25-34).

Recall Mark’s account of the paralytic who was lowered on his pallet through the ceiling of Peter’s home, to find forgiveness and wholeness through the words of

Jesus. He discovered in Jesus what was earlier offered only through Israel’s God at the temple. And it was the hemorrhaging woman who by faith broke through the crowds and, with a mere touch of the hem of Jesus’ robe, was completely healed. In radical new fashion, rather than her uncleanness defiling him, his holiness cleansed her. One touch was all it took. The memory of these two stories so fueled the faith of the crowds that they had no trouble applying it to their own lives, and with abandon.

C. The Impact of Jesus

So as Jesus goes into one town, one village and one hamlet after another the crowds bring their sick to the market place. All they ask for as they lie motionless on their pallets is one touch—and a touch not even of his whole person but merely the tassel of his prayer shawl (Num 15:38-39; Deut 22:12; Matt 9:20; 23:5). With no theological training or personal mentoring, the crowds take just these two stories and seem capable of grasping the fact that they can find forgiveness and wholeness with a mere passing touch of the Savior. How much theology did they understand? I’m not sure, but their wholeness came in full measure. Mark says, “But as many as touched him were saved.” The contrast proved a stinging rebuke to the disciples. Putting both stories together we can begin to appreciate how Jesus was attempting to teach his disciples, and by implication, how he trains us as well.

I will close by drawing four implications from our story regarding the mystery of the dark night of the soul.

III. The Dark Night of the Soul

A. The Necessity of the Dark Night

Let me say, first, that I believe St. John of the Cross was correct. A “dark night of the soul” is not only a reality for believers, it is necessary for our Christian growth, so expect it. There are times in our spiritual journey when God may appear distant. Like the disciples, we may be going through the motions, with hard hearts, taking him for granted, blind to his kind revelations all around us. On such occasions the best thing he can do for us is to turn us out to sea, “seemingly” on our own. It is there we recover the right frame of mind. We feel the prevailing winds of the world, the darkness of the night, and our own weakness, even when we row in unison. It is then, in that darkness, that we learn to cry out anew to him. As the psalmist said:

**Now as for me, I said in my prosperity,
“I will never be moved.”**

**O Lord, by Your favor you have made my mountain
to stand strong;**

You hid your face, I was dismayed,

To you, O Lord, I called,

And to the Lord I made supplication. (Psalm 30:6-8)

B. The Perception of the Dark Night

Second, though Jesus appeared to be absent in the flesh he never lost sight of the disciples in that sea and never ceased praying for them. Their sense of abandonment was more perceived than real. It is no different with us, especially now, after Pentecost, when he has “sealed” us with His Spirit (Eph 1:13) and promised never to leave us or forsake us (Heb 13:5). And Jesus continues his high priestly ministry of praying for us continuously.

C. The Benefit of the Dark Night

Third, the sense of distance we feel serves to intensify the feeling of intimacy when he comes to us. At the fourth watch comes the epiphany, when he who walks on the heights of the waves enters our little boat to put everything at rest. Without the dark night we would have not been able to comprehend it or receive it. I have found that these “dark nights” open my eyes to see the divine love of God in the midst of the most ordinary human touch.

D. The Best News!

Finally, we may be hard hearted, like the disciples. When the epiphany of deity arrives in our little boat in the form of human flesh, we are so blind we can't see it; and when his voice says, “It is I, do not be afraid,” we are so deaf we can't hear it. The good news of our story is the patience and the tenacity of God. If we are making no spiritual progress, or even regressing, if we missed a lesson or two, God is willing to go back to the very beginning and redo the whole curriculum. This is symbolized in Mark's gospel by the crowds responding to the stories of the paralytic and the hemorrhaging woman.

Jesus is a very patient teacher. He does not give up on us. He will repeat things over and over again until we get it right. He is loyal, tenacious, and loving. Eventually we are going to “get it,” because the God we serve makes the deaf to hear and the blind to see. This is the good news of the gospel.

1. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (Harper, San Francisco, 1961) 18.

2. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 335.

3. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 73.

4. Pixner, 73-74.

5. Pixner, 74.

6. C. E. B. Cranfield (*The Gospel According to St Mark* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959] 226) notes that “Mark follows the Roman custom of counting four night watches (cf. 13:35). The Jews divided the night into three watches.” “Therefore be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cock-crowing, or in the morning” (Mark 13:35). The last watch was between 3 and 6 a.m.

7. During the Exodus it was the time of “the morning watch, that the Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion” (Exod 14:24).

8. Gundry, 336.

9. Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 231-232.

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WHAT IS CLEAN AND WHAT DEFILES

Catalog No. 1121
 Mark 7:1-23
 20th Message
 Brian Morgan
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This spring I went to see my favorite musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*. The leading character, Tevya, opens with the well known song, "Tradition." He sings: "Because of our tradition, every man knows who he is and what God expects of him. But you ask, where did our tradition get started? I'll tell you. I don't know." But then he adds, "Without our tradition, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof!"

The play was adapted from the short stories of the beloved Jewish writer Shalom Aleichem. It is the story of the responses of a father's heart when time honored traditions are torn apart in the midst of a rapidly changing and violent world. Tevya's pain is focused in his three daughters, each of whom in turn severs the sacred bonds of tradition in her choice of a mate, each more grievously than the one who preceded her. To me, the musical's most poignant scene is when Tevya is sitting next to his daughter Hodal while they wait for the train that will transport her to Siberia to marry a man who is in prison for his revolutionary ideas. Shrouded in silence, unable to speak, Tevya stares out into the bleak cold. But every parent can read his heart: "O little Hodal, where will you find shelter in Siberia's snow?"

As we are caught in laughter and swallowed in tears, the question seizes us by the throat: Where do we draw the line to preserve our sacred identity in the midst of an immoral world? This is every parent's dilemma. Which traditions are negotiable and which are not?

At no time in history was this question more fervently addressed than in Israel in the centuries prior to the coming of Christ. In 586 B.C. the Jews had lost their land, temple, festivals and king. Only one thing remained to preserve their national identity: the Torah. To safeguard it the rabbis built a fence around it, codifying countless oral traditions. They were trying to establish clear boundary markers in an effort to preserve their shaky identity, so that, in the words of Tevya, "Every man would know who he was and what God expected of him." During the Maccabean period many Jews chose death at the hands of the Romans rather than forsake these traditions.

In Mark's gospel, however, we find a popular, revolutionary rabbi from Galilee apparently ignoring all these traditions, creating no little controversy in Jerusalem.

I. The Challenge of Tradition (7:1-5)

And the Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered together around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from

the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves [lit. 'they were baptized']; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing [lit. 'baptizing'] of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" (NASB)

We have already witnessed some amazing miracles in Mark's account. Bread from heaven and footsteps on the sea both re-enacted Isaiah's prophetic announcement of Israel's new exodus from exile. But we also have seen that the disciples of Jesus were slow to enter into and grasp this fully because, like Israel of old, their hearts were hardened. Finally, after a little re-education through the faith of the crowd they eat from the "miraculous" loaves they had been carrying around for days. Yes, the disciples are finally making spiritual progress; but sadly, the joy is short lived.

Some official representatives from Jerusalem arrive and for the second time in Mark's account (cf. 3:22) douse the joy, this time by challenging the ritual purity of the act. The disciples had not washed their hands properly, they charged. They had eaten the loaves with "impure" hands.¹ In the Hebrew Scriptures the term "impure" was used for what was common as opposed to what was "holy." "Impure," therefore, meant "ritually unclean" (1 Sam 21:4-5). Their challenge provokes a head-on collision with Jesus over the issue of what constitutes "clean" and "unclean."

Mark lists four characteristics (each of which is repeated for emphasis) which drive these traditionalists. First, they take great pride not in what they do, but in what they don't do. Twice we find the phrase "they do not eat unless..." This is the tell-tale mark of a traditionalist.

Second, Mark says that the source of their concern was not the Scriptures but the "tradition of the elders." He is referring to the body of Jewish oral tradition (containing detailed instructions about washing) which was later codified and set up as the "fence for (preserving the integrity of) the Torah."² And, as Edersheim points out, "It was reserved for Hillel and Shammai, the two great rival teachers and heroes of Jewish traditionalism, immediately before Christ, to fix the Rabbinic ordinance about the washing of hands (*Netilath Yadayim*). This was one of the few points on which they were agreed, and hence emphatically, 'a tradition of the Elders.'"³

Third, we are told of their passion. The term "observing" (vs. 3-4) is a rather weak translation of the Greek verb *krateo*, meaning, to "take hold of," "grasp," "seize forcibly," or to "hold fast" so as to prevent someone from escaping, or to be closely united with someone or something. These leaders took their tradition seriously and held on to

it tenaciously.

Finally, Mark describes the breadth of their application. They applied these ordinances with meticulous care. Not only were they careful to dip their wrists carefully,⁴ but they also “baptized” every utensil in the kitchen. How ironic. While John the Baptist was occupied “baptizing” people, inaugurating the “new age,” the scribes were still focused on “baptizing” pots. These religious leaders were as meticulous in washing prior to eating as today’s surgeons are prior to surgery. Such was their drive that whenever they emerged from the “unclean” market place they vigorously cleansed themselves of everything they had come in contact with. What a contrast is Jesus, who heads straight into the market place and “cleanses” everything he comes into contact with (Mark 6:56).

So how will Jesus defend his disciples against this impassioned charge of impurity?

II. The Tragedy of Tradition (7:6-13)

A. Counterattack in Principle (7:6-8)

**And He said to them, “[Beautifully] did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,
‘This people honors Me with their lips,
But their heart is far away from Me.
But in vain do they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’
Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”**

Jesus doesn’t defend his disciples against the charge. Rather, he takes the offensive, puts his accusers on the stand and charges them with a more serious offense. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, he says, “Beautifully did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites.” Jesus is not interested in making friends. As Rikki Watts points out: “Isaiah 29 belongs to that series of utterances in chapters 28-31 which... constitute the book’s most sustained attack on the nation’s leaders”⁵ who, because of their blatant disobedience, would be exiled.

Jesus shocks them with the pronouncement that the once historic “they” has now become “you.” He says, in effect, “You hypocrites, your tradition is evil on three counts.” First, tradition may give the appearance of a zealous life, but in reality it veils a hard heart. Religious people can be the most hard hearted souls on earth. They can be absolutely bereft of the tenderness that marks an authentic relationship with God.

The second indictment, in fact the one that spurred the Reformation, is that elevating human tradition to what is sacred places man on equal footing with God as the source of revelation. This crime has severe consequences (Deut 4:2; 12:32; Rev 22:18). This verse strikes a death blow to every Christian cult whose founders make their own writings equal to the revelation of the New Testament.

And third, once man occupies that same prestigious chair as God, tradition and Scripture will inevitably come into conflict. That is when man casts aside God’s commandments in favor of his traditions, and God is deposed from his rightful place.

Before his accusers can recover from the shock of these charges, Jesus follows with a stinging illustration.

B. Counter-attack Illustrated (7:9-13)

He was also saying to them, “[Beautifully] you set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death’; but you say, ‘If a man says to his father or his mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by is Corban (that is to say, given to God),’ you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that. “

Once again Jesus opens with the sarcastic, “Beautifully”: “Beautifully you set aside the commandment in order to keep your tradition.” The point is well illustrated when their tradition of designating gifts to God comes into conflict with the fourth commandment, to honor one’s parents. To grant honor to someone meant to give him “social weight in the community” (Bruce Waltke). The primary way children demonstrated honor to their parents was by providing financially for them in their old age. Thus, the children returned to their elderly parents the same care which the parents provided them at birth—feeding, clothing and nurturing them. This is the supreme privilege and responsibility of children. “Honoring parents” also meant safeguarding their reputation against any slanderous word or abusive speech which might injure them emotionally. Children uniquely carry the memory of their parents’ shortcomings. They have an unlimited arsenal of stinging missiles which, if launched, can cause great emotional pain. We are never to arm those missiles, though we may be tempted to do so.

Now with just a little tradition of their own, these leaders have managed to set aside the entire weight of the fourth commandment. All that was required was for an individual to place the label “corban” on his financial assets. Cranfield explains that this term “is derived from the verb ‘to bring near’ and denotes an offering made to God... That which is offered to God as a *corban* becomes ‘holy’ and so is no longer available for ordinary use... It did not always mean that the thing concerned had actually to be offered; rather, that it was withdrawn from its originally intended use and was no longer available for a particular person or persons.”⁶ By means of this tradition children could turn their backs on their needy parents, using a holy veneer to escape their duty to them.

Jesus says the consequences of this would be serious. Though it may be difficult for our generation to comprehend, this commandment was so important to God that he sanctioned the death penalty for its violation. By mentioning the death penalty Jesus is really raising the stakes, and perhaps foreshadowing the terrible destiny of that generation (Mark 13).⁷ And, by contrast, we feel the terrible irony that Jesus, who upholds the commandment, will be put to death at the hands of these leaders. Yet, even in that dark hour he will make provision for his mother (John 19:26-27).

If one illustration were not enough, Jesus seals his case by saying, in effect, “This isn’t the only example I could quote. You do many things such as this.” His accusers are condemned to silence. But since they were the ones who had raised the issue of cleanliness and defilement, Jesus now summons the crowd and instructs them by means of

a parable. Here we will discover a radical new development which Jesus is instituting with the New Covenant.

III. The True Source of Defilement (7:14-23)

A. A Parable Addressed to the Crowd (7:14-16)

And summoning the multitude again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. If any man has ears to hear, let him hear."⁸

The importance of what he is about to say, as well as its difficulty to comprehend, is foreshadowed by the words, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand." Only those who take the time, with humble hearts and active minds, to meditate on the cryptic parable will penetrate its meaning, for there is more here than meets the eye of the casual observer. It is only for the one "who has ears to hear" ("hearing" implies obedience to the radical revelation).

B. The Parable Explained to the Disciples (7:17-23)

And when leaving the multitude, He had entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. And He said to them, "Are you too so uncomprehending? Do you not see that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? " (Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

Now we see where this issue of purity and cleanliness is leading. What began over a dispute about handwashing, and escalated to an attack on tradition over Scripture, now finds its climax in defining the real issue of what constitutes cleanliness. Purity, says Jesus, is not defined by what one eats, but what issues from the heart. In the market place the danger is not what you take in and eat; it's what issues from your own heart; that is what will defile you. "Heart" is the key term in the text (vv 6, 19, 21). Nothing which goes into a man from the outside can defile him, since it doesn't touch the heart, but enters the belly and is eliminated (literally: "passes into the latrine").

To make sure his readers do not miss the implication of all of this, Mark adds his revolutionary conclusion, "All foods are now cleansed." Now we know the reason for the parable. Jesus could not have stated this categorically and openly among the crowds, because doing so would have provoked a riot. Here he is not merely undoing human tradition invented to safeguard Scripture; now he has placed himself in the position of nullifying tradition which came *from* Scripture. He has just undone fourteen hundred years of the tradition of Israel's dietary laws! But it was these very laws which set Israel apart from the nations. During the exile they became "one of the most cherished cultural boundary-markers of Israel, a social and religious symbol which people in recent memory had adhered to even when the result was torture and death" (2 Macc 6.18-31; 7:1-42).⁹

So the question now is: How can Jesus sweep away thousands of years of Biblical tradition that clearly defined Israel? The answer is that he did not come to nullify the law but to fulfill it, by inaugurating a covenant renewal that would place God's law in the hearts of his people. As Moses wrote, "Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live...Then you shall again obey the Lord, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today" (Deut 30:6-10). The same promise was reiterated by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who spoke of a new day when God's law would be written on the heart (Jer 31:33; 32:38-40; Ezek 36:26-27). And when that day arrived all ceremonial and cultic aspects of the law would give way to "reality" (Jer 3:16).¹⁰

And yet it is a very radical claim, as Tom Wright explains:

Jesus was claiming that this one God was redefining Israel around himself and his kingdom-proclamation; that, as part of that work, the purity to which Torah pointed would be achieved by the prophet's dream of a cleansed heart; and that, as a result, the traditions which attempted to bolster Israel's national identity were out of date and out of line.¹¹

Thus with clean hearts there would be no necessity for dietary laws which at best only symbolized their purity, and pointed to the One pure loaf which Israel would one day feed upon directly. Now that he has come, what defines us as the people of God is not cultic ritual but the state of our hearts. It is supremely a matter of the heart, a heart on which the Spirit has written the Ten Commandments, empowering us to love God and our neighbor with the whole heart (2 Cor 3:3-6). The great tragedy about Israel's passion for tradition was that it blinded them to the present hour of their liberation of covenant renewal and paralyzed them in their desperate uncleanness.

So where do we draw the line so as to preserve our sacred identity in the midst of an ever changing world? What traditions do we preserve? Let me conclude with four observations from the early church's application of this theme of purity in the New Covenant.

IV. Feeding on New Covenant Renewal

A. Focus Is On the Heart

Whenever the apostles speak of purity in the New Testament the issue is never one of cultic ritual, diet or washings; it is solely one of the heart. As we enter the market place the greatest danger to our purity comes from our own greedy hearts which consume malicious idols. As the author of Hebrews writes, "let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our *hearts* sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:22). This frame of mind ought to give Christians a very humble demeanor. We are our own worst enemy.

B. Relationships Take Precedence Over Food

Secondly, whenever a question arose about purity and food, the apostles responded that relationships always took precedence over food. This explains the somewhat

cryptic verse in Paul's letter to Timothy to "to take a little wine for the stomach and your frequent ailments" (1 Tim 5:23). At first glance the verse seems utterly out of context, since Paul is writing about the ordination of elders. But the larger issue is purity. In order to maintain purity as an elder, Timothy had begun to abstain from wine. But the impure water supply of that society was taking a great toll on his weak digestive system. Paul's answer is that it is far more important for the purity of the church as to whom you lay hands on as an elder, than what you drink. A little wine will do you no harm; an impure elder will destroy you.

The same governing principle applied to abstaining from certain food or drink. Although Paul was free to eat meat, even that which had been sacrificed to idols, he would gladly abstain in the presence of a weaker brother if it damaged his faith. Again, pure relationships meant everything; food meant nothing: "...for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17).

C. Responsibility Takes Precedence Over Devotion

In the church today there is a driving concern for the number of people being set aside to full time Christian work as a sign of success. The apostles were far more concerned with ethical purity within the church, however. The early church had a large population of widows which the church subsidized, receiving in return the benefits of their "full time" service and devotion. But Paul warned Timothy to not place on the list a widow with surviving children. To the apostle it was more important to fulfill the fourth commandment, that children honor their parents, than to get more full time workers for the church. "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8). Ethical responsibility is more important than religious service.

If Paul were writing to believers in Silicon Valley, I imagine he might address the issue of purity in regard to our finances. Many people in this valley are heavily in debt—and I am not speaking of a mortgage payment, which is an investment in an appreciating asset. Rather, I am speaking of debt for goods and services already received and paid for not with money but with a credit card. The debts have mounted and so has the interest. In light of that, how can anyone come to church and give a tithe to show devotion to God when the money isn't his? As Christians, I believe we ought to give the first and best, demonstrating our dependence on God, that he is the "giver of all things." We are to give generously, even "out of our poverty." But we can't give what we don't have. If we have made a bad choice in the past and are in debt to the world, let us first pay off our debts; then we will be free to offer our time and finances to the Lord. Ethical purity comes first, then religious service.

D. The Real Danger to Purity: Affections of the Heart

Because renewed hearts are now indeed the hallmark of God's people, the apostles said that when we are ready to enter into lifetime relational commitments that involve our affections of the heart, we must never compromise. The heart must be safeguarded against rival affections that might lead it into idolatry. This is fundamental to our purity. So Paul writes, "Do not be [unequally yoked] with unbelievers, for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever...Let us *cleanse* ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor 6:14-15; 7:1). For one person that may be a dating or marriage relationship with an unbeliever; for another it may be a certain kind of work environment that evokes all the wrong affections. There must be no compromise here.

We are a new covenant people, free, and laden with no cultic burden. The only hallmark remaining is a heart that loves God and keeps his commandments. How great a tragedy it would be if that one distinctive watermark were lost. It would be a greater tragedy by far than the traditions of the Jews.

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1. The word really means "common" and is the theme word for our text. Its noun and related verb "to make common" or "defile" are used six times (vv 2, 5, 15, 18, 20, 23).
2. C. E. B. Cranfield (*The Gospel According to St Mark* [Cambridge University Press, 1959] 233) points this out with reference to Josephus, *Ant.* 13. 297.
3. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) Bk. 3, ch. 31, pg. 13.
4. The word in the NASB text translated "carefully" (NIV: "ceremonial") most likely means "with a fist," as Cranfield, 233, observes: "different sorts of ritual washing were required for different degrees of impurity. In the Talmud a distinction is made between 'dipping up to the wrist', which is a minor ablution, and the more serious 'plunging up to the wrist', for which a large quantity of water was required."
5. Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 213-214.
6. Cranfield, 237
7. Rikki Watts, 218, makes the very interesting suggestion that Jesus' choice of this commandment is appropriate because it is the first commandment with a promise to live long in the land (Ex 20:12; Deut 5:16). Now its rejection by these leaders will sanction "destruction and exile from the land".
8. The best mss. omit this verse. "It appears to be a scribal gloss (derived perhaps from 4:9 or 4:23), introduced as an appropriate sequel to ver. 14" pgs. 94,95 Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971) 94-95.
9. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 179.
10. "And it shall be in those days...they shall say no more, 'The ark of the covenant of the Lord.' And it shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they miss it, nor shall it be made again" (Jer 3:16).
11. Wright, 398.



“THE COASTLANDS AWAIT EXPECTANTLY”

Catalog No. 1122

Mark 7:24-37

21st Message

Brian Morgan

May 23rd, 1999

In the seventh chapter of the gospel of Mark we come now to one of the most critical lessons taught by Jesus to his disciples about the nature of the kingdom of God. This was the teaching that proved to be the most difficult for the apostles to accept, let alone implement. After they had given verbal assent to it and begun to live by it, more than once they faltered and lost sacred ground, even decades after the resurrection of Jesus.¹ And yet this was the lesson that would prove to be the sharp, life-saving edge of the gospel. If our modern world had been blessed with it there would be no racial cleansing in Kosovo, no apartheid in South Africa, no Arab-Israeli conflict, no divided Ireland, no Holocaust in Europe, and no need for our own Civil War.

This lesson probably makes up the most radical aspect of the gospel, yet it emerges out of what might be considered an antiquated debate about ritual cleansing (Mark 7:5). That debate had taken a radical turn when Jesus declared all foods clean, seemingly dismissing fourteen hundred years of Israel's dietary laws. The implications of that act now land with mind-blowing dimensions, leaving the disciples in awe. Following Jesus has taken them places they never thought they would go. In the same way, if we want to follow Jesus, we, too, must be prepared to go where he took the apostles.

I. Lifesaving Crumbs in Tyre (7:24-30)

A. A Departure to Unclean Territory (7:24)

And from there He arose and went away to the region of Tyre. And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it; yet He could not escape notice. (NASB)

Jesus needed privacy, perhaps because of his dangerous popularity, perhaps to “reflect upon the scope and course of His ministry” (as Taylor suggests), or to prepare for the next steps in the training of the twelve. They had experienced so much in such a short time. Isaiah's New Exodus, with its feeding and sea crossing, had taken place before their very eyes. Now it was time to withdraw and reflect on the next critical phase of their training; thus Jesus flees to the privacy of foreign territory, outside the boundaries of Israel.

This radical move shattered every convention and every notion of what it meant for an Israelite to remain “pure.” If the Jewish leaders were upset by the disciples eating bread with “impure” hands, imagine how they felt when Jesus deliberately transported them into unclean heathen territory, and then crossed the threshold

of a gentile home to eat and sleep. What happened there must have utterly amazed the apostles.

B. The Request of an Unnamed Woman (7:25-26)

But after hearing of Him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit, immediately came and fell at His feet. Now the woman was a Greek, of the Syrophenician race. And she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Jesus was seeking privacy, yes, but his fame had preceded him. For the second time in Mark's gospel he meets an unnamed woman. Her exemplary faith pushes the theological envelope past anything the apostles have yet experienced. She is a Greek, a Gentile of the Syrophenician race, not a Hebrew speaker. As such, she has absolutely no claims on the promises made to Israel, but she is desperate. Her daughter is possessed by a demon, a grave state of uncleanness. This mother learns that Jesus, the one who had brought cleansing and healing to everything he had touched in Israel, had entered the vicinity. Would he do the same for the daughter of a gentile, a woman of no status?

With a bold approach, seeking no intermediaries, she humbly throws herself at his feet and, with a persistent spirit, keeps repeating her request to him. Matthew records her plea: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon possessed” (Matt 15:22). “Mercy,” “Lord,” “Son of David,” “daughter,” “demon.” There is more theology in her short request than has yet to proceed from the lips of the disciples. The question is, How will Jesus respond to the request of a gentile woman who lives outside the covenant boundaries of Israel?

C. A Mysterious Refusal (7:27)

And He was saying to her, “Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Upon first reading, it appears that Jesus' response is surprisingly harsh. The allusion to “dogs” sounds very derogatory to our ears. Is this a racial slur? If it is, how politically incorrect of Jesus! But, as Cranfield explains:

The Jews called the heathen ‘dogs’, but it is doubtful whether Jesus is following that Jewish usage here. The diminutive suggests that the reference is to the little dogs that were kept as pets and not to the dogs of the courtyard and the street. So, by means of the parable of the difference between the claims of the

children of the house and those of the pet dogs, Jesus indicates the difference between the claims of Israel and those of the Gentiles.²

The children to whom Jesus is referring are, of course, the Jews. After the Exodus, Israel was known as “My son, My first born” (Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1). God had chosen them by divine election, not as an end unto themselves but as a light to the nations. And the prophets said that once God had acted to vindicate his people after the exile, all nations would benefit from and share in that salvation (Isa 49:6). Thus, Jesus is pointing out to the woman the divine order of salvation: first the Jew, then the Greek. That is why, during his earthly ministry, Jesus gave himself to ethnic Israel—to preserve this divine order.

So, he responds to her entreaties: “Let the children be satisfied first.” But the term “satisfied” is the exact word that was used of the feeding of the five thousand (6:42). The children had eaten and been satisfied, and there was plenty left over. Calvin pointed out that Jesus intended “not to extinguish the woman’s faith [by his apparent coldness], but rather to whet her zeal and inflame her ardor.”³

Her response demonstrates how Jesus’ words did just that.

D. Unprecedented Faith (7:28-30)

But she answered and said to Him, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children’s crumbs.” And He said to her, “Because of this answer go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter.” And going back to her home, she found the child lying on the bed, the demon having departed.

What a brilliant response! In her humility she has no trouble submitting to the divine order: the Jew first, then the Greek. She does not want to diminish Israel’s privileges. Yes, let the children eat first but, having children of her own, she knows that they often leave a pile of crumbs under the table, morsels that are happily scooped up by the family dog. Unworthy to sit now at the table of the main feast alongside Israel, she requests just one crumb of mercy from under the table; that will be enough. Jesus is surprised and deeply moved by her humility, insight and faith. He freely gives her one crumb, and with that one word her daughter is made clean. Imagine her joy, coming home to find her child delivered from the demon, safe and whole again. There is no greater moment for a parent. This far outweighs the joy of birth. A child once lost to Satan’s host, now cleansed, safe at home in a mother’s loving arms. The faith of this Syrophenician woman serves as an icon for how every future gentile will come to faith.

I wonder what impact this miracle outside the boundaries of Israel had on the apostles. Did it resonate inside them with the stirring echoes of Elijah, who had healed a widow’s son in this same region? Did they wonder if this was indeed the climax of Israel’s history,

when the Gentiles would share in Israel’s salvation? Did this woman’s faith flash Isaiah’s words across their minds, that when God’s Suffering Servant established justice on the earth, “the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law” (Isa 42:4)? Did they see this as the conclusion of the debate over “ritual purity” with the Pharisees and Scribes, where Jesus came not to cleanse mere foods, but people, even “unclean” gentiles? Did they see it as foreshadowing greater things to come as Jesus is expanding the boundaries of the holy land to include the whole earth? We are not told.

Before any response is recorded, Mark takes us back to the Decapolis, on the eastern side of the sea of Galilee. Once again, they are in predominantly Gentile territory.

II. Open Ears in the Decapolis (7:31-37)

A. The Return to Gentile Soil (7:31)

And again He went out from the region of Tyre, and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis.

Bargil Pixner describes this journey with graphic clarity:

It must have been a long walk. At that time a road led from the region of Tyre and Sidon through Caesarea Philippi onto the Golan Heights. It was the road over which grain was brought from Bosra to both these coastal towns (cf. Acts 12:20). This is probably the way Jesus and his followers took to reach the Hipene, the upland northern corner of the Decapolis. From here another route (still traceable today) led down to the lake situated 200 m. below sea level. They would have reached the shore near Tel Hadar.

As Jesus came this time over the Golan Heights in to the Decapolis, he soon realized that he was no longer a stranger here, for the man he had healed at Kursi had praised him everywhere.⁴

B. The Request for a New Creation (7:32-37)

And they brought to Him one who was deaf and spoke with difficulty, and they entreated Him to lay His hand upon him. And He took him aside from the multitude by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva; and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He said to him, “Ephphatha!” that is, “Be opened!” And his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was removed, and he began speaking plainly. And He gave them orders not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it. And they were utterly astonished, saying, “He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.”

Recall that the last time Jesus was in this region he had not been well received. Following the healing of the Gerasene demoniac he had departed, leaving two thou-

sand drowned pigs in his wake. The inhabitants, terrified, and threatened with severe economic loss, had asked Jesus to leave their region. He submitted to their request, but before he did so, he planted one tiny “mustard seed” in that hostile soil to spread the good news of his healing. That seed took root in the ten predominantly Gentile cities known as the Decapolis.

Now, upon his return, he is welcomed and sought out as an honored guest. This should be a great encouragement to us. How instructive it is to learn that God’s kingdom grows by the power of his word, without any coercion on our part. A man who is deaf and has a speech impediment is brought to him, and Jesus is asked to lay his hands upon him. The verb “spoke with difficulty” (*mogilalon*: “the inarticulate grunts of a deaf mute”⁵) is very rare. It occurs but here in the N.T. and once in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures), where Isaiah predicts that in the Messianic age, “the tongue of the *dumb* will shout for joy” (Isa 35:6). What Israel longed for has now arrived in Jesus.

Jesus removes the man from the crowd and, in secluded privacy, his actions closely mirror those of the original creation of man (Gen 2:7). First, he spits; next, he touches his finger in the spittle and places it in the man’s ears; then he lifts his eyes to heaven and, with a deep groan, prays and gives the order, “Ephphatha,” an Aramaic term meaning, “Be opened.” Cranfield comments that the verb means “be opened” or “be released.” “The idea is not of the particular part of the person being opened, but of the whole person being opened or released”⁶ (and often in the context of being liberated from Satan’s bondage, Luke 13:16; Mark 3:27). This may suggest that the man’s deafness and dumbness may have been more than a physical impediment, and had deeper spiritual implications. With but one touch and one word the man’s ears are completely opened to hear and his tongue liberated to speak plainly.

Jesus expresses the desire that this news not be spread. He intended the event to be primarily a private tutorial for the apostles. Therefore he gives the man strict orders to tell no one. But the more emphatic his plea for silence, the more openly the man preaches the good news. The astonished crowds respond with the accolade, “He has done all things well” (“perhaps an echo of Genesis 1:31,” Cranfield⁷). What a marked contrast to their earlier reaction of fear, and demand that Jesus leave their region.

The miracle has great significance, since the Jews considered the ear to be the primary organ of spiritual receptivity, as we observe in that most fundamental command to Israel, “*Hear* O Israel...” (Deut 6:4). God’s people were predominantly a people of the ear. “Hearing” meant to be “receptive,” “attentive” and “obedient” to God’s revelation. This is why hearing even preceded “seeing.” Yet in their sad history, Israel often paid a deaf ear to God’s commandments, turning to

idolatry despite the persistent warnings of the prophets. The tragedy of idolatry, however, according to the psalmist, is that

They have mouths, but they cannot speak;
They have eyes, but they cannot see;
They have ears, but they cannot hear...
Those who make them will become like them,
Everyone who trusts in them. (Psa 115:5, 6, 8)

Now, sadly, Israel had become deaf and blind in exile. But Isaiah spoke of a new day when God would come to save them and they would see the Glory of Yahweh. In that day,

“...the ears of the deaf will be unstopped...
And the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy...
...And a highway will be there, a roadway,
and it will be called “the highway of holiness”...
And the ransomed of the Lord will return,
And come with joyful shouting to Zion,
With everlasting joy upon their heads.
They will find gladness and joy,
And sorrow and sighing will flee away.” (Isa 35: 5-6,
8, 10)

God himself would come into Israel’s midst and heal her deafness so that after her exile, his people would be miraculously obedient. They would finally “hear” God’s word, be attentive to it, and obey it. Such obedience would wrap Israel in a mantle of joy.

The amazing thing about our story is that the very thing which God predicted he would do for Israel, the apostles were even now observing Jesus doing outside the borders of Israel. It was just as Isaiah had spoken:

“It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob,
and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations,
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the
earth.” (Isa 49:6)

Returning to the opening debate, we discover that Jesus did not come to violate laws of holiness, rather, he intensified holiness. The holiness which he gives by the Spirit is so powerful God’s people no longer have to retreat behind external rites of purity or insulate themselves in their holy lands from external threats of impurity. Now they can venture forth into the darkest dungeons of depravity and by the power of the Spirit “cleanse” those they come into contact with. As Tom Wright explains: “In the history of the early church, the forsaking of the Old Testament food laws by Jewish Christians opened the door to mass evangelism of the Gentiles; for Jewish Christians could then mingle freely with Gentiles, eat their food, and not require them to change their eating habits, a requirement that would have sharply reduced the number of Gentile converts (cf. Acts 10:1-11:18; 11:19-26;).”⁸

Yet this was difficult to accept, and even harder to implement. It took extraordinary vision for Peter to fol-

low in Jesus' steps into Gentile territory (Acts 10). Recall God's emphatic words, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unclean" (Acts 10:15). Yet, even later, Peter fell back under pressure from the traditionalists and withdrew from table fellowship with gentiles until Paul challenged him to his face (Gal 2:11-14).

III. "Go unto all nations"

The questions for us are, Do we really believe it? Do we live like it? Let me conclude by asking a few penetrating questions.

As evil escalates in our world, do we run in fear and insulate ourselves behind Christian shelters, or do we see moral breakdown as a sign that God is preparing people who are desperate and, in dire need, are on the verge of acquiring faith? Do we run or risk, venturing forth to places where the desperate congregate?

As moral boundaries degenerate in our world, do we retreat behind apologetics and ethical disgust, or are we brave enough to cross foreign boundaries and offer sinners a few crumbs?

Do we feel threatened when we have a sense of being overrun by new cultures moving into our area, or are we excited, knowing that God is at work in a new way?

How do we view the work place? As a dark repressive place to make money or as a natural highway to make relational contacts? How do we view business trips? As times to be tempted and overrun by the lusts of the world when we are alone in our hotel rooms, or as occasions when people are open to letting down walls of insecurity and sharing the deep things of the heart over a meal? Do you take your meals with non-Christians? In light of this text, work is the primary arena of ministry, and business trips are in fact missions adventures funded by your employers. And if you respond that work is more like a prison, I would remind you that much of the ministry of the early church took place in prisons. Actually, most of the New Testament was written in prisons.

Parents, if you are home schooling your children, in one respect you have a great advantage. You can provide a Christian world view for them in every subject and shape their souls spiritually. But remember, as they get older you must provide natural highways for them for non-Christian friendships so they can enter into full discipleship and participate in this new creation.

To those who have children in public schools, let me say you can't just turn children loose and then overreact when they encounter evil influences. We have to walk alongside them, passionately love their friends, and model caring for unbelievers. Involvement is much better than overreacting because of injustice suffered. This is holy contact in love. So, my advice is, volunteer at your schools. There are all kinds of opportunities in coaching, serving and teaching.

To students, I would say that the best way to grow spiritually is to leave home. If possible, study overseas. To couples, I say, take opportunities to live and work overseas and let your companies pay for it.

The best way to remain pure and live on the "Highway of Holiness" (Isa 35:8) is to actively reach out and love non-believers. The world has never been more desperate. All they need is but a few crumbs.

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1. Compare Acts 10:1-16 with Galatians 2:11-12.
2. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1959) 248.
3. Cranfield.
4. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 80.
5. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 392.
6. Cranfield, 252
7. Cranfield, 253.
8. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).



A BANQUET FOR ALL PEOPLES

Catalog No. 1123

Mark 8:1-21

22nd Message

Brian Morgan

May 30th, 1999

Throughout my life I have experienced the reality of major aspects of spirituality long before I learned the theory behind them. This has certain advantages. For one thing it makes learning very rewarding. Another advantage is that one is driven by passion, not intellect. This is exactly how Mark describes the training of the twelve disciples. Jesus thrusts them into the sea of experience so that they might learn to swim in deep waters. Then, as they emerge and shake the water off themselves, he observes them to see if anything has stuck. Usually, nothing did. But Jesus doesn't quit on them. Undeterred, he puts them right back into the sea of experience. This is how Christian discipleship ought to occur. Some of the most crucial lessons in life are too radical to be taught in a lecture; they must be first caught through experience.

This morning we pick up the story of the disciples once again. They are by the shores of Galilee, and they have just seen two amazing signs of healing, incidents which displayed the dawning of the Messianic Age among the gentiles on the eastern side of the lake. First, Jesus cleansed the demon-possessed daughter of a Syrophenician woman, and then he opened up the ears of a deaf mute. Mark splices these two miracles together to foreshadow the cleansing which the Messiah would bring to the Gentile nations, and their miraculous obedience (*hearing*) which would result from "hearing" God's word. The good news of those two miracles spread like wildfire in this predominantly gentile area of the Decapolis, and a large multitude gathered to be taught by the itinerant rabbi.

I. A Banquet for All Peoples (8:1-10)

A. Hunger in the Wilderness (8:1-4)

In those days again, when there was a great multitude and they had nothing to eat, He summoned His disciples and said to them, "I feel compassion for the multitude because they have remained with Me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and if I send them away fasting to their home, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a distance." And His disciples answered Him, "Where will anyone be able to satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?" (NASB)

These were the same people who formerly had rejected the ministry of Jesus (Mark 5:17). But now, after the Gerasene demoniac had shared his story of healing far and wide, the crowds eagerly gather to hear Jesus' teaching. Such a reception must have deeply touched our Lord. Bargil Pixner fills out the picture for us:

For three days they remained with this prophet from Israel, eating of the provisions in their baskets which they had brought with them and drinking water from the lake. As it was now high summer they could easily

spend the nights out in the open. Some of them may have fished for so-called "Kinneret sardines" which one can still find in abundance today near the shore of Tel Hadar.¹

After three days, food is in short supply, so Jesus takes the initiative and brings up the topic of bread with the disciples and his concern for the hungry crowd. One cannot help but hear the repetition of themes from the first miraculous feeding. It is so obvious it is almost humorous. Once again a great multitude assembles in the desert; again they have run out of food following a lengthy teaching session ("three days" is perhaps a clue pointing to things to come); and, as before, Jesus is filled with compassion for them (cf. Ezek 34:12), longing to feed them. The situation is more critical than the previous feeding. Jesus adds that if he sends them away hungry, they "will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a distance." As Pixner points out, "Though Tabgha, where the first feeding took place was also uninhabited, it was at least surrounded by villages. The hill on the eastern bank was far away from any inhabited places."² But the distance is more than geographical; it is also symbolic of the spiritual condition of these people who have truly come a long way to eat at this banquet table.

But our Lord's concern, although well stocked with carefully chosen clues from the feeding of the five thousand, falls upon deaf ears. The disciples respond, "Where will anyone be able to satisfy these men with bread here in a desolate place?" Had they so quickly forgotten how five thousand were "satisfied" with five loaves in the wilderness? Were they blind to Isaiah's new Exodus which their own eyes had beheld?

So it's back to square one. Jesus again directs the disciples to act out in symbol (bread) what he has just done in reality (imparting the word).

B. The Disciples Become Waiters (8:5-9)

And He was asking them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven." And He directed the multitude to sit down on the ground; and taking the seven loaves, He gave thanks and broke them, and began giving them to His disciples to serve to them, and they served them to the multitude. They also had a few small fish; and after He had blessed them, He ordered these to be served as well. And they ate and were satisfied; and they picked up seven large baskets full of what was left over of the broken pieces. And about four thousand were there; and He sent them away.

Again, as before, Jesus takes what is at hand, this time seven loaves. The multitude is directed to sit down and, as before, Jesus recites the Hebrew blessing, thanking God for the gift of bread. The disciples take on the role of wait-

ers serving the gentile guests at this banquet. A few small fish are produced and, once again in the hands of Jesus, multiply to feed the crowds until everyone is fully “satisfied” (a key word linking this text with the previous ones). And as before, there was plenty of bread left over—seven large baskets full. The similarities are so obvious scholars have debated whether there was only one feeding which is being repeated here by the evangelist. But more careful scholarship, sensitive to text and style, and which does not presume that repetition is the invention of the Biblical writers, observes a number of dissimilarities in this second feeding that, under careful scrutiny, prove very significant.

One of the best works which unlocks the meaning of this text has been done by the English scholar, John Drury. He observes many dissimilarities. First, he says:

...the eaters are different. Instead of the flock of 6:34 they are just a large crowd, *polus ochlus*—heterogeneous too, since some of them are ‘from far away.’ When they sit, it is not in the previous ancient order of hundreds and fifties. They just flop to the ground where they are at his command. The fish they get are not two *ichthuai* but an unspecified number of *ichthudia*, which means little fish or few fish. This diminutive recalls the little dogs invoked by the Syrophoenician woman.³

Other scholars have also noted that the baskets used to collect the remaining bread are different both in kind and in number. These baskets (*kophinoy*) were not the typical round baskets carried by the Jews (*spyridas*), which were large enough to carry a man (Acts 9:25). These were smaller and came in the shape of a mat with handles. When the handles were brought together they formed a container which could carry provisions. “We find them in the floor mosaics of Kursi” (Pixner, 83). And the number of baskets used to collect the remaining fragments is different. After the first feeding, twelve baskets were left over, indicating that Jesus was inaugurating the Messianic feast (Ezek 34:15) for the “New Israel” which he was now reconstituting around himself in the wilderness. At the second feeding, seven baskets are collected. Pixner suggests that “the number seven was to indicate the seven heathen peoples (Deut 7:1b...cf. Acts 13:19), who had once inhabited the land but after its conquest had gradually disappeared or been driven out...One of the Biblical tribes who had been driven out, the Gergashites, had settled in this area.”⁴

So what is the significance of the event that has just occurred? This itinerant rabbi has just inaugurated the Messianic feast for all nations (Isa 25:6), which opened the door to the consummation of history, when Jew and Gentile would be equal heirs in the kingdom of God. This was the day that Isaiah longed for when, after the exile, Israel in her sorrow for so many lost children looked at the number of little ones at the Messianic feast and exclaimed:

**“Who has begotten these for me,
Since I have been bereaved of my children,
And am barren, an exile and a wanderer?
And who has reared these?
Behold, I was left alone?
From where did these come?”**

And God responds:

**“Behold, I will lift up My hand to the nations,
and set up My standard to the peoples;
And they will bring yours sons in their bosom,**

And your daughters will be carried on their shoulders...

**And you will know that I am the Lord;
Those who hopefully wait for me will not be put to shame.” (Isa 49:21-23)**

Here is the feast for which Israel had been waiting. And the twelve disciples have not only become eyewitnesses to the event, they have been set apart as privileged waiters to serve at the feast. What a joy! What a privilege! One would think they would be ecstatic, dancing with a joy greater than David’s before the ark (2 Sam 6:14). But sadly, it is all lost on them. They leave in haste, oblivious to heaven’s scent. The story beckons us to ask: How many times have we been similarly oblivious to heaven’s feast?

II. Leaven in the Loaf (8:10-13)

And immediately He entered the boat with His disciples, and came to the district of Dalmanutha.

And the Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, to test Him. And sighing deeply in His spirit, He said, “Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.” And leaving them, He again embarked and went away to the other side.

As was the case earlier, this feast also is followed by a boat trip which ends in confrontation on the shore. If the disciples have dampened Jesus’ joy, the Pharisees obliterate it. Once again they appear, this time demanding that Jesus show them a sign from heaven. How ironic! Requesting a sign from heaven when they refuse to see the signs on earth! After two miraculous feedings, demons cast into the dark abyss, and the healing of the deaf, they have the gall to ask for a sign. This would be like asking Moses for a sign after he had led Israel safely through the Red Sea, routing the Egyptians, the greatest nation on the face of the earth. Matthew adds that no sign would be given except the sign of Jonah, that reluctant prophet who ministered to the gentiles and received a far better reception from the Ninevites than he did from unrepentant Israel (Matt 12:39-41). The demand deeply grieves Jesus, and he takes leave of them. Never will he submit to the agendas of others when they are done in the vein of unbelief. He never argues or competes. He will not even enter into the discussion. We would do well to learn from his example.

III. Cleansing the Leaven (8:14-21)

A. A Warning Misunderstood (8:14-16)

And they had forgotten to take bread; and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. And He was giving orders to them, saying, “Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” And they began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread.

Taking leave of his opponents for calmer waters, Jesus utters one of his emphatic warnings: “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” Hearing the word “leaven,” we can surmise that the disciples instantly began to think, “Oh, the bread! Darn! (although fishermen likely would use a more earthy exclamation!) We forgot the bread. Peter, what were you thinking? We left seven

baskets of bread on the shore. Who's in charge anyway? Is this all we have, one measly loaf?" If Mark had attributed hard heartedness to the disciples following the first feeding, it's now apparent that they are blind. Preoccupied with their little world, they fail to see the larger picture. "If the Pharisees are demanding a special display of divine pyrotechnics in the heavens to convince them, the disciples have not yet got their eyes off ground level! The one group is demanding far too much: the other expecting far too little."⁵

By mentioning the word "leaven," Jesus does not mean they should be careful of physical leaven (he had just declared all foods clean). Rather, he is referring to certain kinds of *teachings*, in this case, those of the Pharisees and the Herodians. Beware of insidious teachings which ever so silently and secretly seek to invade this banquet. Beware of vile teachings which, like leaven, will spread and permeate everything, until in the end this miraculous feast will be spoiled beyond recognition.

The leaven of the Pharisees and the Herodians are two sides of the same coin. "The Pharisees...saw Israel's redemption in the struggle against Rome, while the Herodian dynasty offered the hope that friendship with Rome would result in peace and contentment."⁶ In principle, both were using power politics to achieve their aims for the kingdom of God on earth. The one hoped for revolution under a hypocritical guise of piety (Luke 12:1);⁷ the other compromised integrity to maintain the political status quo, based solely on their materialistic motives. Compromise with Rome was fine so long as Jerusalem's stock was rising. To such, money was more important than morals.

Jesus hated these methods. He spares no words to make sure his disciples know how demonic and destructive such ways are to this feast. But it's obvious that they don't get it. And neither do we at times. It's easy to condemn such methods from afar and label them as a plague, as in the Inquisition or the Crusades. But it's more difficult to spot the leaven in ourselves and thoroughly cleanse the church of all power politics when we allow our brothers to form political factions and lobbies and then have the gall to label what they are doing "Christian." I so appreciate our elders who throughout our history have faithfully maintained clear boundaries in this regard. They have never permitted money making schemes masquerading under the guise of Christianity or allowed the endorsement of any political candidates or party line from either pulpit or patio.

To help the disciples penetrate beyond their physical senses now, Jesus engages them in a question and answer session.

B. A Lesson in Math and Memory (8:17-21)

And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember, when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?" They said to Him, "Twelve." "And when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they said to Him, "Seven." And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

Jesus is saying, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? There is but one loaf in the boat (8:14). What more do you need?" Can't they see that the loaf is Jesus? Then he reiterates Isaiah's pronouncement which he spoke in the parables: "Are you going to be like Israel's leadership, condemned to blindness and hard heartedness? (Jer 5:21; Ezek 12:2; Isa 6:9-10). Will you become like the idols they worshipped, having eyes but not seeing, and having ears but not hearing? Do you not remember?" For the fifth time in Mark's gospel Jesus rebukes the disciples for their slowness to understand (4:13, 40; 6:52, 7:18). It seems as if everything has been wasted on them.

John Drury captures Jesus' frustration:

With the miraculous meals so replete with major significance, the controlled fury of Jesus' interrogation...is understandable and apt. He is desperate. They missed so much. The argument in the cornfield and the Davidic precedent, the lively exchange with the Greek woman and the miraculous meals before and after it – all have been lost on them. More than that, they have lost track of the holy and divine, which, in this long train of coded events associated with bread, has shifted from its accustomed setting into a new place: from old tradition into Christ's life and body and the new community which will be nourished by it.⁸

But Jesus will not give up on them. And he doesn't give up on us, either. To help them he gives a basic lesson in arithmetic: "Let's go back to the very beginning. When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Twelve." "Very good," says Jesus. "Now how many baskets full did you pick up when I broke seven loaves for the four thousand?" "Seven," they replied. Listen to Jesus' cryptic answer: "Do you not yet understand?" That statement is for us as well. But I must admit that every time I read it, my answer is, No, I do not understand.

John Drury points out that the key is found in the context. Mark has already left adequate clues in his wake, things that only the attentive will understand. The key that unlocks the mystery is found in the story of David, Israel's first Messianic king. In 1 Samuel 21, to which Mark has already alluded (Mark 2:25-26), David is fleeing from Saul into the wilderness. Ravenous by the time he arrives at Nob, he asks the high priest, "Now therefore, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found" (1 Sam 21:3). But only the consecrated bread was available from the twelve loaves of bread of the Presence. The priest responds that David can have that bread if his mission is holy. David replies that his mission is indeed a "holy" one. The reader knows how "holy" David's mission really is, for once David nourishes this little army of rebels they will form the nucleus of the "new" Israel which will overthrow Saul.

This corresponds to the miracles of the feedings. When we sum up the number of loaves, it corresponds to the number of loaves in Israel's shew bread. Five plus seven equals twelve. This keeps the twelve loaves of Israel's holy bread intact, and becomes symbolic of the ONE loaf, which is Christ himself. Out of that one loaf there has been served a Messianic banquet for all Israel (five) and now the Gentiles (seven). What a banquet, when Jew and Gentile sit as one family to partake of the one feast! That is when members of every nation look at each other with tears in

their eyes and say, “Take and eat the body of Christ broken for you.” What God has joined let no man separate.

Now that we “understand,” our task is to recreate this feast wherever we go, transforming every field into a sacred hill of holiness. And the best news of all is that our role is to be the waiters. So as we close, let me give you the recipe for the Messianic Banquet. Whenever we plan a party, we need to set a time, place, and menu, and then send out the invitations.

IV. Recipe for Recreating the Feast

A. The Time

The amazing thing about the story of Jesus is that the very thing the Jews expected God to do at the end of history, he has done with Jesus in the middle of history.⁹ The time to celebrate this feast is now, and it has been “now” for two thousand years. Though we live in the “now, but not yet,” and look forward to its final consummation in a new heaven and new earth, yet the “now” is vital. And the role of the Spirit is to take the life of the age to come and fill it out in our lives while we yet live in these mortal bodies. So we don’t live our lives waiting for heaven; we live to bring heaven to earth, as the Lord taught us to pray (Matt 6:10). So this feast ought to be a daily occurrence. The church becomes then an “eschatological outpost in time” (Don Carson). Yes, we are indeed God’s eschatological people of the future. As we gather, the future comes racing into the present, time stands still, and for a moment we are caught up in that inconsolable stab of joy. That is the purpose of the feast—for the people to taste eternity.

B. The Place

Second, notice there is nothing fancy about the location of the feast: it is held in the desert. And it looks more like a barbecue than an elegant, high-brow affair. No one has to dress up, and there are no seating assignments. People merely come and sit down wherever they like. It’s all very spontaneous. And so we observe in the New Testament, and later in the history of the church, that the most sacred events have often occurred in the most ordinary, unexpected places, oftentimes outdoors.¹⁰ The lesson is obvious: Don’t wreck things by making the feast so formal that you quench the Spirit.

Last summer we were in the little town of Simeria, Romania, in a house on the top of a hill overlooking the city. Behind the house was a cornfield, half plowed, half ripe for harvest. Early on Sunday morning my friend, James Garcia, headed off into the cornfield with his guitar. “Where are you going?” I asked. “It’s Sunday. Let’s have church,” he replied. So I gathered our small team, a few children, and our hostess, Esti. Together we made the short journey into the cornfield and assembled in a circle. As James started playing and we sang it seemed as if time stood still and heaven itself descended and enveloped us.

And there we stood upon the sod
a small circle lost in time embraced
for there it was in a field of corn
that Noah’s heaven flooded our space.

Before we had breakfast, we celebrated communion. Af-

ter each one took the bread and the cup we sat in sacred silence. No one could talk. No one could eat. We had had the feast already. It was 11:30 a.m. I shared the news of our heavenly feast with my Romanian friend Ionatan. He smiled and said: “That was the field where Violeta’s father laid hands on us and prayed for us when I asked for her hand in marriage. It was also the place where angels used to gather in answer to our fervent prayers to protect us during our secret meetings in the Lord’s Army. You just walked into the field of angels.” I’ll never forget the joy of discovering that holy place, so simple, yet so profound.

C. The Menu

Third, notice the simplicity of the menu. Only two things really, the word and the bread, the word of Christ and the body of Christ. That’s all. Do not spoil it by making it more complicated, adding fancy dressings and sauces. Teach the word. If you can’t teach it, then just read it with feeling, and ask people what they think. If you’re too timid to read it, show one of those Jesus films that have led so many people to Christ. Keep the menu simple. Don’t complicate it with the teachings of men. And don’t defile it with bad leaven. Don’t dare come to this table and use it for political or economic agendas.

D. The Invitations

Finally, once you have determined the time and place, and prepared the menu, send the invitations. How is this done? The text illustrates that the best people to do the inviting are brand new believers who have a story to tell. Ask them to invite all their old friends. Notice that the list can’t be controlled or closed. It must be open. Anyone can come. I believe we are too ingrown as a church. Our fellowship groups are far too comfortable. Why don’t you break out this summer and recreate this feast by inviting non-believers into your homes? This is the purpose for which we live as pastors—to train you to recreate this feast right where you live. Let not Jesus say of us, “Do you not yet understand?”

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1. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 81.

2. Pixner, 82.

3. John Drury, *Understanding the Bread: Disruption and Aggregation, Secrecy and Revelation in Mark’s Gospel*, 111.

4. Pixner, 83.

5. Donald English, *The Message of Mark* (IVP, 1992) 155.

6. Pixner, 89.

7. “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Luke 12:1).

8. John Drury, “Mark” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Mass.: HarvardUP/Belknap Press, 1987) 416.

9. Quote taken orally from Tom Wright during his lectures at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.

10. I am reminded of George Whitefield’s methods and the impact he had when many mainline churches refused him entrance to use their pulpits. He turned the fields into a pulpit, and revival was the result.



BLIND TO HIS WAY

Catalog No. 1124

Mark 8:22-9:1

23rd Message

Brian Morgan

June 6th, 1999

Do you believe in miracles? Do you believe that Christ performed miracles? Do you believe that he still does miracles today? This morning we will examine one of Christ's greatest miracles, an event which prefigured the greater miracle he continues to do in the church today. In fact, our text from the gospel of Mark makes it clear that one can't be a true disciple of Jesus unless this divine miracle has occurred in one's life.

We pick up the story of Jesus following the second miraculous feeding of the multitude, this time the feeding of the gentiles. When it had been completed, Jesus solemnly warned his disciples to "beware of the leaven of Herod and the Pharisees," which would spoil this banquet. A thumbnail sketch of Galilee and its environs will help us understand what he meant by this. Bargil Pixner notes that if you were to stand by the sea of Galilee in Capernaum, where Jesus established his ministry, and gaze about you, you would find that Jesus operated between the two opposing political centers of Tiberias and Gamla. To the southwest lies Tiberias, the site of Herod's fortress. The Herodian party cultivated friendship with Rome as the key to peace and prosperity for the Jews. Opposite Tiberias, to the northeast, lies Gamla, the neighboring town to Bethsaida. This site represented a diametrically opposite political viewpoint. Pixner writes:

Like an eyrie, Gamla was poised on a rocky ridge protected on each side by deep sweeping valleys. Jehuda of Gamla, who was a Pharisean scholar, together with Rabbi Tzadok, a Pharisee too, founded the Zealot movement in A.D. 6.¹

They believed that God alone was the ruler of Israel, not Rome. They forbid the paying of taxes to Rome. They awaited a political Messiah who would lead their troops from victory to victory against Rome, and a number of Jehuda's sons and grandsons led more than one revolt against the Romans in Jerusalem. The Romans countered in A.D. 66 with an attack on Gamla and these hot-headed zealots rather than being taken by the Romans threw themselves down the cliffs in a collective suicide. This dynasty of leaders finally met their end at Masada.

Galilee was filled with these young hotheaded zealots. The setting for our story is Bethsaida, the sister town to Gamla. On one occasion, Andrew, who was from Bethsaida, whispered into the ear of his brother Simon, following his meeting with Jesus, "We have found the Messiah." There is no doubt about what he meant by that term. Peter, Andrew, James and John all came from Bethsaida.

I. A Miracle of Sight (8:22-26)

A. Stage One: Partial Sight (8:22-24)

And they came to Bethsaida. And they brought a blind

man to Him, and entreated Him to touch him. And taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes, and laying His hands upon him, He asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men, for I am seeing them like trees, walking about." (NASB)

Jesus sails between these opposing political centers, Gamla and Tiberias. He steers a narrow course between them, symbolic of a third way. But even in the midst of his signs and warnings the disciples appear dull of heart and unable to grasp the significance of what he has been saying. These men appear to be made out of the same stuff as their forefathers, whom Isaiah described as blind and deaf, for "you have seen many things, but you do not observe them" (Isa 42:20). But the day was nigh when, according to the prophet, the God of Israel would come,

"And I will lead the *blind* by a way they do not know, In paths they do not know I will guide them." (Isa 42:16)

"What Yahweh had promised to do for 'blind' and 'deaf' Israel, leading them along a path they did not know, Jesus does for his disciples" (Rikki Watts). "Bethsaida was situated on a hill on the eastern bank of the Jordan, which flowed into the lake about one mile further downstream... On landing they passed a rich spring on their way into the town."² As they enter that place, Jesus is entreated to heal a blind man. Mysteriously, he leads the man by the hand out of the village, and in company with the disciples only, spits on his eyes and lays his hands on him. Then Jesus asks him if he sees anything. What is extraordinary about this encounter is that, unlike any other miracle in the Bible, this one occurs in stages. The man is ecstatic as the healing begins to take effect. The Greek is a bit awkward, but the construction shows his excitement: "I can actually see people, for they look to me like trees—only they walk!"³

B. Stage Two: Total Vision (8:25-26)

Then again He laid His hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly. And He sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village."

Again Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes. When he removes his hands, the man opens his eyelids wide and sees everything clearly. His vision even extends to great distances. He has been completely restored. "Not only can the ex-blind man see the people in the village clearly, but nothing at all remains unclear."⁴

Jesus concludes the healing with a stern warning to the man: "Don't you dare even set foot in the village!" He is to go directly home, not back into the public square where he had probably been begging and where everyone would notice him.

With the completion of this miracle it is time for Jesus to be alone with the twelve. He wants to see what has taken place in their spiritual vision. Here we reach the turning point in Mark's gospel.

II. Partial Sight: The Prophet is King (8:27-30)

A. The Opinion of the Crowds 8:27-28

And Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but still others, one of the prophets."

Jesus heads due north, to Caesarea Philippi, which had been rebuilt by Herod Philip and named Caesarea. The city was located at the headwaters of the Jordan, beneath the slopes of Mt. Hermon, in the midst of a very beautiful and fertile country. The most exquisite waterfall in all of Israel is situated there. But the lush landscape was scattered with idols whose niches still remain carved out in the rock beside the cascading streams.

In this setting now Jesus poses the question to his disciples: "*Who do people say that I am?*" Popular opinion held that Jesus was some kind of prophet, either John risen from the dead or Elijah or some other prophet. No great revelation was needed for the masses to perceive that Jesus was a prophet, for no one could speak as he spoke nor do the things he did "unless God was with him" (Nicodemus).

Jesus probes further.

B. The Opinion of Peter (8:29-30)

And He continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." And He warned them to tell no one about Him.

By this time Peter has concluded that Jesus is much more than a prophet. He recognizes him as Israel's promised Messiah, the one who, like David of old, would represent Israel, fight her battles and vindicate her from her enemies. In Matthew's account, Jesus adds that Peter's understanding came about by a divine miracle: "*Blessed are you, Simon Barjonas, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven*" (Matt 16:17). Jesus follows Peter's confession with a blunt warning to the disciples to tell no one. Just as he had warned the blind man to stay out of the village, so now Peter also is sworn to secrecy. The reason, of course, is that Peter's vision, just like that of the blind man, is only partial. Yes, the prophet is king, but Peter has no idea what that means, so a second divine touch to his eyes is necessary.

III. Full Sight: The King Must Die (8:31-39)

A. Full Sight: The King Must Die (8:31)

And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Yes, this prophet is king, but Peter is without insight concerning the "way" of the king. Jesus picks up the "Son

of Man" image here from the book of Daniel. This was a very significant term to Jews in the intertestamental period. It depicted the "one true Israelite who is able to accept the mission and destiny of his people" (Hooker). That mission would include being given over to suffering at the hands of pagan nations which are depicted as wild beasts (Daniel 3, 6, 7). Then, after faithfully enduring suffering, this "Son of Man" would be vindicated, just as Daniel was when he emerged safely from the lion's den (Dan 6:23). The vision in Daniel which captured the imagination of the Jews in exile was the time when the prophet saw "one like the Son of Man" *coming* on the clouds to take his seat on a throne next to "the Ancient of Days" to rule over the whole earth forever (Dan 7:13-14). This was the vindication for which all Israel was waiting.

Jesus has no qualms about identifying himself with that "Son of Man." He too will be handed over to his enemies to suffer the psalmist's greatest fear, death itself:

**The Lord has disciplined me severely,
But He has not given me over to death.** (Psa 118:18)

Rather than overthrowing the evil of the world by force, he will absorb it, allowing evil to exhaust itself in him. This is how he will disarm the real enemy, the devil. Then, once he has suffered as Israel's representative, he will be vindicated, and in quick time—just three days. This is the way of the king, vindication through death and resurrection, implying that every promise for vindication which Israel had hoped for would now come through death and resurrection. (This has important implications for hermeneutics and for understanding the prophetic promises made to Israel.)

The revelation of this mystery brings a strong reaction from one of the disciples.

B. The Human Reaction (8:32-33)

And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

Peter cannot accept Jesus' word, so he draws him aside and rebukes him. The strong verb means to "*seriously censor*" or "*punish*." It is used in the Greek version of the Old Testament (LXX) to describe the reproofing Word of God which calls down destruction on the wicked or dries up the Red Sea (Psa 9:5; 68:30; 106:9; 119:21). The word is employed sparingly in the New Testament. Given the severity of the term it would seem inappropriate for Peter to address it to one whom he had just identified as king. But Peter has no qualms about "getting in Jesus' face," as we say today: "You may be king, but you will not die!" he exclaims. His words reveal an emotional reaction to the "way" of the cross and the stumbling block it presents to true discipleship.

But Jesus gets right back in Peter's face, returning the same severe rebuke to him, in full view of the twelve, not in private. As Gundry aptly observes: "Peter for the moment stops being a disciple; for disciples follow *behind* their teacher at a little distance (see esp. 1:17-18, 20; 2:14; 6:1, 31; 8:34; 10:21, 28, 32, 52) ... Jesus' turning and seeing his disciples points up the fact that they are following *behind* him, as disciples do, but that Peter is not among them

and therefore is not acting as a disciple.”⁵ Jesus emphatically warns them that to acknowledge that he is king but refuse his “way” of being king, is to remove themselves from the school of disciples and become the tools of the devil. Bringing about the kingdom of God our way is the way of the devil. The end never justifies the means, of course. Jesus demands that Peter return to his rightful place as disciple and follow “behind” him. How much evil would have been avoided in the history of the church had Christians obeyed our Lord’s rebuke!

C. Instruction on the Way (8:34-9:1)

And He summoned the multitude with His disciples, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.” And He was saying to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste of death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”

Jesus summons the crowd and delivers a pointed public sermon.⁶ Let there be no mistake about what he is saying: If anyone wants to follow behind this king he or she must follow his way. This is not an open issue. And his way means giving up your way, putting your life at risk, and taking up a cross. In those days, the only people who carried crosses (actually the horizontal beam of the cross), were criminals on their way to execution. Many of the condemned were political revolutionaries from Galilee. As they made their way to the place of execution they endured the ridicule, spitting and jeers of the crowds. Jesus is saying, “If you want to be a disciple and follow behind me, you must be willing to endure that kind of shame and ridicule, although you are innocent.”

Why would anyone be willing to do that? Jesus gives four compelling reasons. First, he says, it is the only way to preserve your life. Verse 35:

“For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it.

The house is burning and there is but one exit; there is no other way out. If you stay in the house, like the Herodians with their plentiful investments in Jerusalem, you will lose your life. Following Jesus through the doorway of shame, ridicule, and perhaps even death is the only way to preserve your life.

Secondly, says Jesus, consider the value of your life. Verses 36-37:

“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Your life is more valuable than the whole world. If you understand that, you will gladly give up anything in exchange for it. There is a scene in the movie *Schindler’s List*

when the value of each Jewish soul dawns on Schindler. At the end he cries over and over, why didn’t he do more? Why didn’t he sell his car, his ring, everything? The Holocaust had done its work on him. Henceforth he would measure everything in terms of lives. Your life is worth everything. If it were to be threatened, you wouldn’t hesitate to give everything away for it.

Thirdly, the window of opportunity won’t be open forever. Verse 38:

“For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”

The image of the Son of Man coming in glory again goes back to the imagery of Daniel 7:13-14 and speaks not of his coming to earth, but of his “coming”⁷ into heaven to receive power, dominion and glory. It refers to his kingly reign over all nations following his resurrection and ascension. And here Jesus speaks of his new role as “high priest” and advocate before the Father (“the Ancient of Days,” Dan 7:13). The exalted Christ is in that role from his ascension through the second coming, and from that throne executes judgment and salvation. So he warns the Jewish nation, which he labels as “this adulterous and sinful generation,” that if they are ashamed of him and his way, then he will be ashamed of them when he enters that majestic reign.

That shame had tremendous implications. In A.D. 70, the Romans leveled and burned Jerusalem, killing 1.2 million Jews in the massacre. Josephus records that there were so many zealots crucified in that year that the Romans ran out of wood and even space to crucify them. But once they had lost their lives there was nothing they could offer to buy them back. They had no advocate in the Son of Man.

That judgment ought to serve as a warning to us as well. Paul exhorts us, “Now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). Don’t wait to make a decision. The window of opportunity is open. The time is now.

There are three compelling reasons to follow the king’s way. First, it is the only way with a future; second, your life is worth everything; and third, the window will not remain open forever. These three reasons are followed by a fourth, a glorious promise. Chapter 9, verse 1:

And He was saying to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”

Soon, Jesus will select three of the disciples to whom he is speaking and take them up the mountain where they will see and taste the future, a sight beyond anything they had ever experienced on earth. Jesus is telling us as well as the disciples that once our eyes have been miraculously opened to see the way of the cross, then our senses will not only be able to see the way to glory, we will taste it. We will live our lives as the people of the future, even before we die.

Whenever I read these verses about the suffering of the cross and the glory to follow I hear the words of a poet haunting me. In 1988 I met Traian Dorz, a Romanian poet who spent sixteen years in prison enduring the shame of the cross. During that time he composed ten thousand

poems to the praise of Christ. When I met him, he drew my face close to his and said, "You *teach* about the cross. We *live* under the cross." I was stunned by his words. Then he prayed for me, that I would know something of the sweetness of Christ that he knew in prison. I have since met several men who were in prison with Traian Dorz. Without hesitation they told me that those days were the happiest of their lives. It was there, in prison, that they tasted the glory, through the suffering.

IV. 20/20 Vision

The ultimate miracle is that in the grace and persistence of God, Jesus is able to take a man as petulant as Peter, the one who insisted on doing things his way, and open his eyes to see the king's way. After witnessing the cross and the resurrection he is willing to take up his cross, endure the shame, and follow Christ. At the end of his life he considered it an honor to die the king's way by being crucified (tradition suggests he was crucified upside down). As it was with Peter, so it would be for every apostle, and for Stephen and Paul, too. They all became the scum of the earth for Christ's sake, and most lost their lives but in so doing saved them.

This is the ultimate miracle, not the opening of physical eyes but the eyes of the hearts of self-centered people so that they willingly accept not just the king but the king's way.

Does God still do miracles? Yes. I see evidence of it right here within our congregation. I see a young athlete who wants to glorify God with her body and fails, but then sees a greater glory through her tears. I watch a couple lay a six year-old son on Moriah's alter and give thanks to God for his life and not grow bitter. I see a couple lose twins at nine months, and through his tears the father composes two songs of praise to remember them forever. I see other couples grieve in their barrenness and yet embrace a multitude of spiritual children. I see a friend's reputation de-

stroyed in a wicked lawsuit and many brothers picking up their crosses to identify with him in his shame. In the end he writes a poem of praise because he has discovered a new spiritual father. I see a husband accept Christ and willingly endure the shame of a wife who left him for the world's way. I see a couple who willingly adopt AIDS infected children lest they be left in the shame of loneliness. And I see a young man stand up to the oppressive work atmosphere in a company that gives no time for family and announce, "I'm not doing it your 'way' anymore." He chose to quit rather than have riches the world's "way."

My heart is warmed, not when people say, "I see Jesus," but when, after that second touch, they cry, "I see everything clearly now." That is when they see the king's way, the way to plant the kingdom here on earth, and rejoice in the way of the cross. It is then that the words of prophet ring true,

"I will lead the *blind* by a way they do not know,
In paths they do not know I will guide them." (Isa 42:16)

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1. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 91-93.
2. Pixner, 94.
3. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1959) 265
4. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 418.
5. Gundry, 432.
6. Gundry, 434, points out the chiasmic structure of the sermon: (a) 8:34, (b) 8:35, (c) 8:36, (c') 8:37, (b') 8:38, (a') 9:1.
7. See N.T. Wright's excellent discussion of this in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 512-519, 624-625, 632, 635-636, 640-641, 651.



THE WAY UP THE MOUNTAIN

Catalog No. 1125

Mark 9:2-13

24th Message

Brian Morgan

June 13th, 1999

Today is graduation Sunday. This is a joyous time for students, because graduation marks an arrival. But it signals a departure, too, so it is mingled with sadness. In our text from the gospel of Mark the time has come for the disciples of Jesus to graduate to a new level of understanding. As we will see, their graduation takes place on a mountain.

I love mountains. There is something magical about climbing a precipitous peak and taking in the view. When I studied in Florence as a college student, most of my group were eager to visit Rome. I wondered why anyone would want to do that when we were so close to the Alps. My friends all went south, to Rome, but I went north, to Zermatt, Switzerland, and skied on a glacier underneath the Matterhorn. The shadow of the mountain haunted me for months, and I returned to climb it later that year. Following a long ride in a gondola, we had a strenuous three-hour hike to the base of the mountain, at 12,000 feet. I remember feeling sobered upon passing a graveyard where some less fortunate climbers were buried. At 3 a.m. we arose to ascend up the ridge with our guide. It was the first clear morning in eighty-eight days. Four and half hours later we reached the summit. The view was spectacular. We could see most of the glaciers and peaks which gave Switzerland its shape.

What is it about mountains that makes us want to put our lives at risk climbing them just to take in the view? I think what we are really longing for is heaven. Deep within our souls there lies a racial memory of Eden, which was located on a mountain. There heaven's breath saturated the very blade of earth, and God's presence was everywhere, personal, intimate, and dangerous. After paradise was lost, God created a new people for himself and brought them out from Egypt to worship him on a mountain. That mountain was enveloped in a cloud, and in that place Moses was able to speak with God. Centuries later, after combating Baal worship on Mt. Carmel, Elijah fled for his life and met God on that same mountain. There in the moment of his deepest desolation he was re-commissioned with a fresh vision from the voice of God. "Abraham's strangest and darkest dealing with God took place on a mountain. David lifted his eyes to the hills, and saw in them a symbol of the presence of God."¹ That was where he set in place plans to build the temple on the hilltop of Jerusalem, the building which was to be the axis point between heaven and earth.

Approaching the story of Jesus, we might expect that during his journeys in the wilderness and through the sea he would also make that same journey up the mountain with his disciples. That time has finally arrived. Having been at least partially healed of their spiritual blindness, the disciples are ready to see heaven and taste the future. This important story sets the high water mark for what is possible in worship every time we gather. Are you ready for the steep and dangerous journey?

I. The Journey Up the Mountain (9:2-8)

And six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up to a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. And Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were conversing with Jesus. And Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" And all at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus only. (NASB)

To better understand the background for this text we must recall the imagery in Exodus 24, when Moses met with God on Mount Sinai, following the Exodus.² There Moses took three named men, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and, together with the seventy elders, ascended to meet with God on the mountain. Upon their arrival, "They saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they beheld God, and they ate and drank" (Exod 24:10-11). Then Moses and Joshua went up the mountain itself, and a cloud enveloped them,

And the glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days, and on the seventh day, He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the mountain top. And Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days

and forty nights. (Exod 24:16-18)

So intense was the glory of God on the mountain that when Moses descended, the glory made his face radiant, so much so that the sons of Israel were fearful of coming near him (Exod 34:29-30). God instructed Moses to make a tent, a moving sanctuary, for his presence. This tent would travel with the Israelites in the wilderness to their final resting place in the promised land. Upon completion of that tabernacle, God's glory enveloped it and became their traveling signal and guide through the wilderness until the time when they would see the promised land (Exod 40:34-38).

Notice that in our text Jesus has just announced:

“There are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.” (9:1)

Here we find that “‘see the kingdom of God’ substitutes for the older story’s ‘see the land.’”³ Jesus will be giving his disciples a glimpse into the second, and final, promised land. Just as Moses took three disciples up the mountain so does Jesus, perhaps, as Gundry suggests, to minimize the risk of premature publication while still providing enough witnesses (Deut 19:15) to confirm the event (2 Pet 1:16-18).⁴

It is unlikely that the mountain they ascended was Mount Tabor, the traditional site, since it lies quite a distance south of Caesarea Philippi. The other difficulty, Pixner explains, “lies in the fact that at that time Mount Tabor was populated (Ant. 13,396) and a Has-monean fortress stood on its summit. The fortified mountain had to be conquered by the Romans in the great Jewish War in the year A.D. 67.”⁵ Better evidence supports Mount Hermon (Eusebius 265-345) whose slopes run down to Caesarea Philippi. Mount Hermon’s peak soars 9000 feet above sea level and remains snow capped most of the year (the run-off feeds the rushing headwaters of the Jordan river). It is probable that Jesus led Peter, James and John up on one of the peaks of the Hermon range.

On that mountain, isolated from the crowds, Jesus is suddenly transformed⁶ before them. Not just his face, but his entire being is transformed. Even his clothes are radiant. Mark attempts to describe them, but words fail him. He can only stumble over his similes: “as no launderer on earth can whiten them.” We might ask, What is the significance of what these disciples are seeing? Is Jesus’ hidden divinity being revealed?” I think not. Tom Wright explains:

The glory which shone from Jesus’ face on the mountain is the glory of a human being, made in God’s image, and now totally open to God, totally possessed by God, totally on fire with God. Seeing this human being, we are seeing God, God in a mirror, God through the looking glass, God present as in the burning bush but now in the shining face, and even clothes, of a man amongst men.⁷

This is the glory of one like the “Son of man.” It was the glory for which Jesus was destined as our representative man in heaven, the same glory we all are destined for: the glory of the resurrection, a glory which we will some day possess but which we are to taste even now.

To the amazement of the disciples, Elijah and Moses appear beside Jesus. We have already discussed Moses’ significance as the founder of the nation. Elijah, who encountered God on Mount Sinai, was just as significant a figure. The prophets spoke of him as being the eschatological signal which would inaugurate the reign of the Messianic king, before the great and terrible day of the Lord (Mal 4:4-6; note how that text also links Moses with Elijah). So here on the mountain time collapses into this one moment and Moses and Elijah appear together: the founder of Israel and the prophet who cleansed Israel, the one who gave the law, the other who renewed it and whose return would signal the “restoration of all things.”

The disciples hear these men having a conversation with Jesus. Peter is overcome with fear, but he feels compelled to make a contribution to this theological discussion, so he offers to build three tabernacles commemorating the three luminaries. His suggestion isn’t all bad, since this is exactly what Moses was instructed to do following his encounter with God on Sinai. He was to construct a portable sanctuary to house God’s *shekinah* glory. (The details of that sanctuary cover five chapters in Exodus.) But Peter’s suggestion is met by a rebuke, his second within a week. Suddenly, a cloud⁸ representing the presence of God envelops them, and a voice speaks from out of the mist. For a second time we hear the voice of the Father in Mark’s gospel. Again, the speech is carefully constructed from Old Testament texts, and again, as in the Moses story, God’s speaks on the seventh day:

“This is my Son, the beloved one, hear him!”

Here is the Father’s voice, so simple, yet so profound and compelling. His first words, “this is my Son,” come from Psalm 2:7, a coronation psalm for the king. Next, the phrase, “the beloved one,” comes from Gen 22:2. There Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son, his only son, the one whom he loves, Isaac, on Mount Moriah. God carefully splices together two texts as a witness to Jesus’ identity: He is the son, and he is going to be crowned Israel’s true king. But the “way” this king will be crowned is the Isaac way: He is the beloved son, to be sacrificed on Moriah’s altar. Here we are given a glimpse of the agony of the Father’s heart over what is to come. To those two texts God adds a third, from Deut 18:15, announcing that one day he would raise up a prophet like Moses from among the people, and on that day the primary duty of the people of God would be to *listen* to him. That was when God would re-write Israel’s *shema* (Deut 6:4). Then, instead of obeying laws written on stone, God’s people would find the Spirit of the living God speaking into their very hearts (2 Cor 3:5,6,18), and he would lead them into obedience to this

Son.

This explains what was wrong with Peter's suggestion to build three tabernacles on this spot. The kingdom is moving forward, not backwards. After Jesus' death, God's temple would not be limited or confined to a particular space. It would be mobile, inhabiting people of every race. This glory cannot be captured and held; it is but a taste of what is to come. God's future temple will not house the glory of Elijah or Moses, but solely the glory of Jesus. Elijah and Moses were mere pointers to the Messiah. Everything pales in comparison to his glory. Jesus embodies the fullness of deity in bodily form. He is the true temple. Even the old shelters were but earthly copies.

When God has finished his very short speech, suddenly the curtain separating heaven and earth closes as quickly as it has opened, and the disciples find themselves mysteriously alone in the presence of Jesus. What an earthshaking event! Here in one moment time is compressed, history is telescoped, moments of the past engage the present and press against the future; heaven condescends, stoops, and kisses everything in sight. And then God himself envelops the little band with a holy fear that stills everything. When the dust settles, everything, past, present, and future, is centered around the Son. For a brief moment in time they had been standing on the edge of the horizon, then in an instant it was over and they must go back down the mountain. The painful thing about being creatures of this earth is that every time we go up the mountain we have to come down, and the experience that once filled us with glory now leaves us with a gaping ache that makes us long for more.

Before we leave the mountain top, allow me to make two points of application.

II. Man Made for Heaven

This is what we were made for; this is what makes us fully human. It is worshipping God that draws huge worlds together. And this is what is possible every time we worship. Let us not come to church merely to sing a few hymns, put some money in the plate, open a text, listen randomly, and leave. No. If we have eyes to see, and hearts that are open, when we worship we find huge worlds racing together and compressing in a moment, so that "a drop of time will impregnate eternity."⁹ Space, once limited to three dimensions, now breaks open to a fourth and becomes high and lofty, inhabited by infinitely more than the naked eye can see.

This is what the author of Hebrews was so adamant about: the realities of heaven have broken in on us and there is no going back. After he had spoken of the awesome terror of what Moses experienced at Mt. Sinai, the author says that we have come to something far greater:

You have come to Mount Zion and to city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the

first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant... (Heb 12:22-24a)

Secondly, this is how we are meant to be transformed while we remain on earth. We are not transformed by doing, but by seeing. And when we open the Scriptures and see Jesus in this burning glory, we, as Paul says, "with unveiled faces beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being *transformed* into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). Tom Wright leaves us with the challenge: "There are levels and depths of spirituality that are open to all of us, but from which we hide ourselves, from fear of what the transforming presence of the burning God might do if he were truly given free rein in our hearts and lives."¹⁰ Let us remove the veils and allow the transfiguration to do its work over and over again.

III. The Journey Down the Mountain (9:9-13)

And as they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man should rise from the dead. And they seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead might mean. And they began questioning Him, saying, "Why is it that the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" And He said to them, "Elijah does first come and restore everything." (Question:) "And yet how is it written of the Son of man?" (Answer:) "That He should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?"¹¹ But I say to you, that Elijah has indeed come, and they did to him whatever they wished, just as it is written of him."

As the disciples make their way back down the mountain their hearts burned with awe and wonder. Whatever happened there, Jesus makes one thing clear: there was to be absolutely no publication of this event to anyone, not even the twelve, until after the Son of Man was raised from the dead. The idea of resurrection seized their imagination, especially since they had just seen Elijah. He was the one prophetic signal who would turn "the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal 4:6) before the great and terrible day of the Lord. Unable to grasp the significance of what had occurred, the disciples question Jesus as to how there can be resurrection, which restores everything, before Elijah has indeed come.

Responding to their question, Jesus shifts their attention from Elijah to the Son of man, and asks, "How is it written concerning the Son of man?" Answering his own question, he says, "[It is written] that he should suffer many things." Then he helps them to properly understand the Hebrew prophets. When they spoke about the coming age, they always did so in terms of their present or past historic images. Then they placed

the images into metaphors linking Israel's past with the glorious future, so that the new is always continuous with the old, but is never merely repeated. Using the literary device of metaphor, the prophets were saying that the new is transcendentally better than the old, as the glory of the sun outshines the moon.

So, explains Jesus, Elijah will come, and has indeed come, make no mistake, and they did to him whatever they wished. Mark has already given his readers a graphic account of that. John the Baptist was Elijah, and he was beheaded. Now Jesus presses his disciples to see the inference: "If that is what happened to the forerunner of the Messiah, what do you expect will happen to the Messiah?" This is why they are sworn to silence. Yes, resurrection is coming, and with it the restoration of all things, but the disciples don't yet fully understand the way to the resurrection and the restoration of all things. That will come through suffering: the cruel suffering of the cross. Jesus can't remain on the mountain; He must descend to suffer an agonizing death.

The most painful thing about climbing the Matterhorn was not the journey up the mountain, but the descent. For five hours I felt the excruciating pull of gravity pounding on my limbs. I must confess, so painful was the descent, I wished I had never made the ascent. I wonder if the disciples felt that way after Jesus shared this sobering news with them.

So why the vision of the future? Why be allowed to taste the glory only to have the vision snatched away in a bloody hell and cruel sorrow? Was God being capricious? No. The taste of glory is not a myth. It is real, it is substantial, and it is given to encourage Jesus not to avoid the suffering, but to go through it. As the author of Hebrews says, it was "for the joy set before him, [he] endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2). That taste of heaven was meant to encourage Jesus to endure the darkest night, knowing there would be a glorious future.

Paul had the same experience. He wrote that at one point in his life he was caught up into the third heavens (2 Cor 12:2), and what he heard and saw was unspeakable glory. That vision of heaven was given not to puff him up but to encourage him in the face of the many sufferings he was to endure, that he might go through his ordeals faithfully. In my own life, when heaven has

appeared most real to me, when time stood still and I could sense the hush of angels' wings, when the floodgates of love poured over our souls, I found it was preparing us to endure suffering, whether it was painful rejection, evil persecution, or even death. If we have tasted the future we can endure anything. If we know that all suffering has a limit and a destination, we can endure. Years ago, living near the Alps, I discovered that no dark tunnel in Switzerland is without an end. Once we have come through the view is breathtaking. So I encourage you, buy a ticket and get on that train today.

The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.
The angels keep their ancient places;
Turn but a stone, and start a wing
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.
-Francis Thompson

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1. N.T. Wright, *The Way of the Lord, Christian Pilgrimage Today*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 70.
2. For an excellent discussion of these themes see Williard M. Swartley, *Israel's Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic Gospels, Story Shaping Story* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994) 103 ff.
3. Swartley, 105.
4. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 462.
5. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 97.
6. The Greek term for transfigured is *metamorphoo*, meaning to "change form" or "transform" (this is where we get our term "metamorphosis"). In the New Testament it is used four times, twice of the transfiguration, once in Rom 12:2 of our transformation by the renewing of our minds, and in 2 Cor 3:18 of the 'transforming' power of seeing the glory of Christ with unveiled faces.
7. Wright, 71.
8. On the image of the cloud with the presence of God see Exod 16:14; 19:19; 20:21; 24:15-18; 33:1; Psa 18:12, 97:2; 1 Thess 4:17; Rev 1:7.
9. I am indebted to my good friend and fellow elder, Steve De Pangher, for this image.
10. Wright, 74.
11. This is M. D. Hooker's interpretation, *Son of Man*, 131, quoted by Gundry, 464.



HELP FOR UNBELIEF

Catalog No. 1126

Mark 9:14-29

25th Message

Andrew Drake

June 20th, 1999

Our annual trip to Mexicali is the most significant outreach of our High School ministry. After a week ministering in Mexico, students and adults alike are radiant, not because they have been out in the sun all week, but because they have tasted a bit of heaven on earth. By stepping out in faith and using their spiritual gifts daily in situations way beyond their comfort level, they are able by the grace of God to draw others into his kingdom and draw near to one another and to the heart of Jesus like never before.

One of the most significant nights we share during that week is our final evening together around a campfire at the beach in San Juan Capistrano. There we are able to share how powerfully God met us during that week, and there we begin to prepare our hearts and minds to return home. We reflect on God's faithfulness to us, and we pray for one another as we embrace for the rude awakening that awaits us as we come down off our mountaintop experience.

It is easy to have a strong and vibrant faith when we're on top of the mountain. In Mexico we didn't have to struggle with an annoying sibling, an unbelieving girlfriend or an overbearing parent. Nor did we have to struggle with the temptation of drugs, the pressures of school, or the monotony of a job. It was tempting for many to want to stay huddled together on the beach under the stars and around the campfire.

During our mountaintop experience we were immune to the struggles and fears and doubts and threats of our life down below. But that is where we are called to live out our life in Christ—below in the valley. How often we want to hide away in the safe and secure confines of a mountaintop experience! These are the emotions that Jesus and his disciples are dealing with as they descend the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. Up on the mountain his glory was revealed and the reassuring voice of God was heard, but it is that same voice that directs them to the valley below to minister in his name. As it was with Jesus and his disciples, so it is with us. The foot of the mountain is where God has called you and me to engage in a spiritual battle where evil must be confronted and unbelief is a constant threat.

As we continue to follow Jesus through the gospel of Mark on Father's Day, it is only appropriate that after the Lord and his disciples descend the mountain they encounter a father. The meeting between Jesus and this father, and later between Jesus and his disciples, will encourage us that we are not on our own, that there is help for us to live a life of faith down off the mountain. This word will speak to all of us, believers and skeptics alike.

We pick up the story in Mark 9:14-18:

A. The disciples are unable to cast out a demon because of their lack of faith (9:14-18)

And when they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. And immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed, and began running up to greet Him.

And He asked them, "What are you discussing with them?" And one of the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth, and stiffens out. And I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it." (NASB)

This incident is reminiscent of Moses' return from his mountaintop encounter with God only to find faithlessness on the part of Israel. Here also after his transfiguration, Jesus finds an unbelieving generation upon his descent. As he and the three approach the place where they had left the other nine disciples they notice a large crowd. In the center are the scribes and the Lord's disciples, involved in a heated argument.

We are not told the nature of the argument, but it seems likely that these scribes were sent by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem to gather evidence against Jesus. Here they have the perfect opportunity to call into question the validity and nature of the disciples' ministry and that of their Master, because his very disciples are unable to cure the boy. It is obvious the nine were having a difficult time defending themselves before all these people, and at just the right time Jesus comes to their rescue.

As is usually the case, Jesus confronts his critics with a question: "*What are you discussing with them?*" he asks. Although he addresses the scribes, they do not answer. They are more than happy to publicly dispute and mock the disciples when Jesus is not there, but in the presence of Jesus and his question they fall silent. But the silence does not last very long. From out of the crowd a courageous, desperate man steps forward. It is the father of the boy. He addresses Jesus' question (verse 17): "*Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth, and stiffens out. And I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it.*"

Respectfully, the father addresses Jesus as "Rabbi," and goes on to give a brief account of what has recently transpired. The boy's condition is critical. He is possessed by a demon of considerable strength. It deprives the boy of the ability to speak; it repeatedly throws him to the ground, causing his body to stiffen; and his teeth grind and his mouth foams like a rabid animal.

The father had intended to bring his grievously stricken son to Jesus to be healed, but noticing that Jesus was not in the company of his disciples, he then asked them to heal him. And why not? Hadn't they previously been successful in casting out demons and healing the sick? But in this case they fail miserably. The man had brought his son, believing in Jesus' ability to exorcise the demon, but the failure of the disciples, who represent Jesus, crushed his faith almost completely. If their strength derived from Jesus, then their failure would seem to imply that Jesus too will lack the power to heal. Thus

the father's belief in Jesus (and the belief of the entire crowd) is badly shaken.

The father had known about Jesus' reputation as a healer, and that is why he was there. But the miracles of Jesus were never intended simply to enrapture a crowd or develop a miracle-hungry following; they were meant primarily to give evidence that he and God the Father were one. Consider Jesus' words from the gospel of John: "*Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves*" (John 14:10-11).

Even though Jesus had previously performed many miraculous works, revealing that he and God were one, this one instance of the ineffectiveness of his disciples was enough to call into question their belief in his true nature and power. It is this unbelief that brings Jesus' quick and exasperated lament. His response to them is filled with deep emotion. Verse 19:

And He answered them and said, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?"

Sorrow, disappointment, and even a sense of urgency are heard in this cry from Jesus' lips. He has little time left to soften their hard-heartedness and quicken within them a believing faith. But his exasperation does not immobilize him from taking action. Immediately after his lament he issues a compassionate command: "Bring him to Me!"

Verses 20-22:

B. Jesus delivers the boy after the father expresses his humble faith (9:20-27)

And they brought the boy to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling about and foaming at the mouth. And He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!"

At the sight of Jesus the demon vents his terrible power upon his victim and the entirety of the boy's affliction is manifested before the eyes of the Lord. But instead of immediately addressing the demon, Jesus turns to the father and asks, "*How long has this been happening to him?*"

Jesus is not interested in the boy's case history, nor is he trying to gain information he does not already know. What he is doing is expressing his deep concern for the father and his son, and setting the stage for the father to confess just how desperate his need truly is. By asking the question, Jesus is helping the father realize what he is really asking. He is not asking for a medical remedy but a divine miracle, and this requires faith in Jesus as the divine helper. The question is necessary for the faith which Jesus aims to build into the man's heart.

Sensing Jesus' deep compassion for him and his son, the father feels free to go into greater detail concerning the boy's affliction. The seizures had been going on since he was a small child, and when the demon attacked, he tried to destroy him by throwing him into both fire and water. For years no doctor or medical remedies had offered any relief, let alone heal him completely. It was painfully obvious to all that help for the

boy could not be found resident in the power of men.

Notice that it is not only the boy who needs restoration. The father so closely associates with his son, and is so personally affected by this demon possession, that he says, "*But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!*" So tender and intense is his love for his son that the affliction of his child was an affliction on him as well. And so he pleads not only for his son, but also for himself.

But the father's request of Jesus is still beset with hesitation and doubt. He says: "...*if You can do anything, take pity on us.*" Even though he brought his son to Jesus as an act of desperation and faith, his "if You can do anything" reveals just how little faith, if any, he actually has. He doubts Jesus' sovereignty, and he lacks faith in Jesus' power.

Here, at this expression of the father's crisis of faith, Jesus again stops and probes further. Verses 23-27:

And Jesus said to him, "If You can! All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the boy's father cried out and began saying, "I do believe; help my unbelief." And when Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again." And after crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, "He is dead!" But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.

Jesus is concerned not only for the boy's physical well being but the spiritual health of his family. Restoration of the man's faith would come only as Jesus reasserts his power to heal and summons the man to trust him. So Jesus says to him, "*If You can! All things are possible to him who believes.*" The father's "If you can" meets with a quick comeback from Jesus. He says, in effect, "Regarding your phrase, 'If you can,' the question is not whether I am able but whether you believe and are willing to trust me with your life and your son's life. The heart of the matter is whether or not you will let go of your doubts and disbelief and trust in me for healing. I cannot heal you if you do not first give yourself to me for healing."

Jesus says something similar in Mark 10:27: "*With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.*" The emphasis is not upon the degree, the quality or the amount of the man's faith, but upon his trusting relationship with Jesus.

My son Evan wants to learn how to swim and play in the big pool just like his older sister Olivia. I am trying to help teach him, but I cannot help him until he trusts me. He can talk all he wants about how much he would like to learn how to swim, but ultimately he reveals his strong desire to swim and his trust in me *only* when he lets go of the side of the pool with both hands and fully clings to me.

Faith in God is like that. It is a letting go of life lived on our own terms and our own strength and clinging with all our might to the love and person of Jesus. This is what the father finally does when he says to Jesus, "*I do believe; help my unbelief.*" Here is one of the great responses in all of Scripture. Not only does the man cry for help, he honestly confesses the poverty of his faith. He pleads for help just as he is, a doubter.

The verb tense which the father uses here suggests he is asking not only for help in this moment but he is petitioning Jesus to continue moment by moment and day by day to come to his aid that he may overcome his unbelief and be filled with a strong and vital faith.

The moment he says those words, the moment he casts himself in his weakness onto the Lord, Jesus rebukes the spirit and the son is delivered. Verses 25-27:

And when Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again." And after crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, "He is dead!" But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.

The loud shriek of the demon and the now calm body of the boy are evidence that the demon has indeed left the boy at the command of Jesus. Actually, the body is so still that the crowd says, "Yes, Jesus, you cured him of the demon all right. He's dead." But the boy is cured, not dead, and Jesus gives witness to his new life and restored strength by reaching down, grasping his hand and lifting him up to his feet.

We should not miss the fact that Mark uses resurrection language here. The term he employs in relation to the boy is the same one Jesus will use to describe his own rising from the dead (Mark 14:28). The point is quite clear: the life-giving power of Jesus is not only for victory over illness and evil, but for victory over death itself.

But the story does not end there. There is work that needs to be done in the heart of the disciples as well. Verses 28-29:

C. The remedy for the disciples' failure is faith expressed through prayer (9:28-29)

And when He had come into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer."

Even though Jesus has just given this boy and his father a new life, Mark records nothing of the reaction of the boy, his father, the crowd, or the scribes. The spotlight at the end is on the disciples and why they had failed to heal the boy. They were at a loss as to why they could not cast out the demon. They had been given authority by Jesus to do so in the past and had much success (6:7-13). So in the privacy and seclusion of a nearby home they ask Jesus, "Why did we fail?"

According to Matthew and Luke, Jesus answers their question by saying it was because of their little faith. They lacked faith even the size of a mustard seed. Mark's account, however, records Jesus as saying their failure was due to their lack of prayer. And of course, these two go together. Where there is little faith there is little prayer, and where there is little prayer there is little faith.

I do not believe that Jesus meant the disciples needed a particular kind of prayer uttered at the moment they came face to face with the demon, because Jesus himself did not pray when he cast it out. What they needed was not trust in a special technique or set of words, but trust in an almighty and loving God whose healing power could flow through them. And this kind of faith can only come through a *lifestyle* of prayer—the kind of lifestyle that Jesus himself exemplified. He was always in touch with his Father, always walking in reliance upon him and drawing his passion and strength from him.

One of my favorite authors, Henri Nouwen, has this to say about Jesus' prayer life:

Jesus continuously left his apostles to enter into prayer with the Father. The more I read the Gospels, the more I

am stuck with Jesus' single-minded concern with the Father. From the day his parents found Him in the Temple, Jesus speaks about his Father as the source of all his words and actions. When he withdraws himself from the crowd and even from his closest friends, he withdraws to be with the Father. "In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there" (Mark 1:35). All through his life Jesus considers his relationship with the Father as the center, beginning, and end of his ministry.

If prayer was so central for Jesus to maintain his relationship with his Father, then how much more so is prayer essential for you and me?

Many of us can identify with the main characters in this drama.

Some of us are like the *disciples*. We are already believers in Christ, but our Christian walk is lukewarm and our ministry ineffectual at times.

The disciples had come to believe that the power to walk and minister effectively in Jesus' name was inherent in themselves. This was a subtle form of unbelief, because they began to trust in themselves rather than in God. Jesus gently reminded them that it was not they but God who overcomes evil.

It is no different for you and me. Our battle against Satan requires a lifestyle of prayer too. We need to be reminded of Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian church: "*Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil... With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit*" (Eph 6:10,11,18a).

It is only when the disciples were caught up short that they learned they did not possess any power of themselves. The power and strength they needed belongs entirely to God and must be received from him through a life of dependent prayer. But before we become too hard on the disciples, we ought to admit we are often just like them. We too are plagued by failure, too ready to engage in arguments, undisciplined in our prayer life, and more eager to learn techniques and depend on ourselves than to take time to walk closely with God.

Like a branch that thinks it can survive and produce fruit apart from the vine, we often act as though we can overcome life's struggles and minister in God's name relying solely on our own strength. As a church body we are so well equipped and so richly instructed that each of us must be careful not to lack in humble dependence upon God for all that we do. Whether we are teaching a Sunday school class, witnessing to a friend, disciplining our children or loving our spouse, we must pray for his mighty work to be done in and through us.

There can be no excuses. In his book, *The Living Reminder*, Henri Nouwen warns us about sacrificing prayer for ministry: "We have fallen into the temptation of separating ministry from spirituality. Our demons say: 'We are too busy to pray, we have too many needs to attend to, too many people to respond to, too many wounds to heal.' Prayer is a luxury, something to do during a free hour, a day away from work or on retreat."

But Jesus reminds us: "*Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing*" (John 15:4-5).

We can be called and gifted, prepared and ordained to be the disciples of Christ, but if we do not remain in constant contact with the source of our power we will fail. God may have given us a gift, but unless we maintain a humble dependence upon him to express our gift it becomes ineffective.

As I reflect on this text, I am convicted of how this is often true in my own life and ministry. It is easy for me to fall into the trap of self-dependence, especially when it comes to preaching. One of the reasons I can get so stressed out over my sermons and over-prepare for them is because, lacking faith, I can depend more on the power of my words than on the power of the word of God to instruct, admonish and encourage you. When I do that I become merely a man of words, not a man of power. There is room for my faith to grow, and the Lord is graciously helping me to let go of my strength and cling to his.

Some of us here this morning are like the *father* in our story. Like him, our disbelief stems from disappointment. Maybe your faith has received a setback because of the shortcomings of those who profess to trust in Jesus. Maybe you have been disappointed by the Church and individuals within it. Whatever the reason, when it comes to the divinity and power of Jesus Christ, we find within ourselves a combination of belief and unbelief. Faith and doubt co-mingle when it comes to trusting him and putting our life and the lives of our loved ones completely into his hands. We sense there is too big of a gap for our very little faith to bridge.

The good news of our text, however, is that we need faith only the size of a mustard seed (Matt 17:20; Luke 17:6). It is not the size of our faith but the object of our faith that is important. We are not left on our own; God will supply where we are insufficient.

One of the most memorable examples of this struggle between belief and unbelief is found in Sheldon Vanauken's book *A Severe Mercy*. Vanauken befriended C. S. Lewis and relentlessly questioned him in his journey toward Christian faith. Vanauken describes his struggle this way:

Christianity—in a word, the divinity of Jesus—seemed probable to me. But there is a gap between the probable and proved. How was I to cross it? If I were to stake my whole life on the Risen Christ, I wanted proof. I wanted certainty. I wanted to see Him eat a bit of fish. I wanted letters of fire across the sky. I got none of these. And I continued to hang about on the edge of the gap.

And he remained on the edge of the gap until, he says:

I was forcibly struck by the reply of a man to Jesus' inquiry about his faith: "Lord, I believe: help thou mine unbelief." Wasn't that just my position? Believing and not believing? A paradox, like that other paradox: one must have faith to believe but must believe in order to have faith. A paradox to unlock a paradox? I felt that it was.

And then one day later there came a second intellectual breakthrough for Vanauken. He describes it in these words:

It was the rather chilling realization that I could not go back. In my old easy-going theism, I had regarded Christianity as a sort of fairy tale; and I had neither accepted nor rejected Jesus, since I had never, in fact, encountered him. Now I had. The position was not as I had been comfortably thinking all these months, merely a question of whether I was to accept the Messiah or not. It was a question of whether I was to accept Him—or reject. My God! There was a gap behind me, too. Perhaps the leap to acceptance was a horrifying gamble—but what of the leap to rejection?...I could not reject Jesus. There was only one thing to do, once I had seen the gap behind me. I turned away from it and flung myself over the gap towards Jesus.

It is when heaven and hell have both been glimpsed that going back is impossible...I confess my doubts and ask my Lord Christ to enter my life...I do not affirm that I am without doubt, I do but ask for help, having chosen, to overcome it. I do but say: Lord, I believe—help Thou mine unbelief.

To those of you in a similar position today, it is my hope that that will be your prayer too: "I believe. Help my unbelief." To you, Jesus says, "Come to me. Come as you are right now, with all your doubt, your disbelief, your sin, your hopelessness and restlessness." *"Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light"* (Matt 11:28-30).

Is it possible for our lives to be transformed? Is it possible to bridge the gap between doubt and faith, weakness and strength? Is it possible to be at peace with God and have victory over evil and death? Jesus says it is all possible if you believe in him, if you trust your life to him and lean on his strength. All things are possible for us when we believe, because all things are possible for the One in whom we believe.

Heavenly Father, on this Father's Day I want to thank you for bringing before us a shining example of a loving father. May this remind us that you are our Heavenly Father, and like the father of both the prodigal and the proud son, nothing is too great to separate us from your love. You reach out to us wherever we are. We may be riddled with sin, doubt, or pride, and yet you love us and desire to draw us to yourself and make us whole.

I want to thank you for your word. I pray that it may penetrate deeply into our hearts and minds. For those here this morning who have not put their trust in you, I pray that they may see your love and power and cling to you. For those of us who have put our faith in you and yet so easily delegate you to the sidelines of our lives, I pray you would bring us to a place of humility that we might become a people of prayer and full dependence upon you.

Thank you, Father, for helping us in our unbelief, for initiating and strengthening our faith, and for bringing us into an intimate love relationship with you where we can experience and express your love and power. We pray in the name of your Son Jesus. Amen.

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THE PATH TO GREATNESS

Catalog No. 1127

Mark 9:30-50

26th Message

Andrew Drake

June 27th, 1999

Over the past 15 months, *Time* magazine has published the first four in a series of five special editions chronicling whom they regard as the top one hundred “great men and women who with their lives wrote the history of our times,”¹ the century’s most influential “Leaders and Revolutionaries, Artists and Entertainers, Builders and Titans, Scientists and Thinkers, and Heroes and Inspirations.” Later this year they will announce their “Person of the Century.” I am curious as to who they consider great, and by what measure they determine that. Almost all of the eighty individuals identified up to this point have achieved what the magazine considers greatness by moving up the ladder of success through aggressively challenging and defeating their competition. Greatness, it seems, is often measured by the number of casualties left in people’s wake on their way to the top.

In our text from the gospel of Mark this morning, Jesus reminds us that greatness in the kingdom of God is measured quite differently, however. Last week, we looked at the encounter between Jesus and the father of a demon-possessed boy. This was an instructive lesson for the disciples on how they needed to live in utter dependence upon their Heavenly Father. We saw that a Christian’s power and strength comes from God alone, and that faith to receive and act on that power is nurtured through a lifestyle of prayer.

In chapter 9 of Mark’s account we will see in graphic terms what the attitude and responsibilities of a follower of Christ should be, and learn with the disciples the path to *true* greatness.

A. Loving the lowly (9:30-37)

And from there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He was unwilling for anyone to know about it. For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is to be delivered up into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise again three days later.” But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him. (Mark 9:30-32, NASB)

Following several busy days in the north, Jesus now turns south from Caesarea and heads back toward Capernaum, along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Mark stresses that Jesus is seeking to avoid public attention. He wants to set aside time for the private instruction of his closest followers, to prepare them for what lies ahead and teach them how radically new life in God’s kingdom truly is. Foremost on his heart is communicating to the twelve what his fate will be as the Son of Man. This is the second time Jesus shares about the events that will soon unfold, but for the first time he says he will be “delivered” into the “hands of men.” Mark records that the disciples did not

understand what he said and they were afraid to inquire further.

All of this was difficult for them to grasp. They must have pondered who would betray Jesus, and why would men go so far as to kill him? And surely they must have wondered that if he were killed, and rose from the dead in a show of power and strength three days later, then what? They were afraid to explore these things further with him, but as they traveled they began arguing with one another over the implications for them of such a prediction. Verse 33:

And they came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. (9:33-34)

Mark does not say how the argument developed, but we can imagine their discussion went something like this: “If Jesus is going to die and rise again, and rule a new kingdom with power as the Son of Man, then who will be his right-hand man? Who will be his most trusted advisor and how will he rank the other eleven? Who will be first and who will be last? Which of us will Jesus choose as the greatest?”

Following their arrival at a home in Capernaum, likely the residence of Peter and Andrew (1:29), Jesus continues the process of instructing them by asking the question, “*What were you discussing on the way?*” They knew the discussion was inappropriate, and in their embarrassment they remain silent in the face of Jesus’ inquiry. But even though they did not answer him, he knew what they were talking about. Now he goes on to address the very issue that was burning in their hearts and minds. Verse 35:

And sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all.” And taking a child, He stood him in the midst of them; and taking him in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever receives one child like this in My name is receiving Me; and whoever receives Me is not receiving Me, but Him who sent Me.” (9:35-37)

Showing great patience, and taking the customary posture of a rabbi instructing his pupils, Jesus sits down and gathers the twelve around him. He tells them once again that the way of the kingdom of God is different from what they expect: “*If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all.*” What he said was completely counter-cultural. The disciples were looking to establish a hierarchy in their midst, like that of their contemporary culture where titles and rank meant everything. The more people who served you and catered to your needs, the greater your status within the community. But Jesus says that in order to be first, one must become the servant of all. Great-

ness is not measured by how many serve you, but by how many you serve.

The path to greatness in the kingdom of God is not paved at the expense of others. It is not attained through coercive power or a domineering attitude that makes people feel weak and small. Greatness is achieved through a spirit of love and service, building others up and seeing them as more important than yourself (Phil 2:3). Jesus is not saying there is anything wrong with a Christian holding a leadership position, but that a Christian in a position of authority ought to reflect an attitude of humility and a desire to serve and strengthen others.

To reinforce this lesson, Jesus lovingly embraces a little child, and says, *“Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.”* Children occupied the lowest place in the Greco-Roman world. They were ignored and abused because they were without rights, influence, wealth or power. By embracing this child, Jesus has symbolically taken the position of receiving and welcoming him. Jesus, the first and greatest, here makes himself the last and lowest by submitting himself to serving and loving the lowest of the low, a child.

Now from this point on the disciples did not drop everything and minister exclusively to children. They understood that a child represented those who are not highly esteemed, who are needy and are easily ignored and neglected without anyone knowing or protesting. The parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31-46) reveals the kind of people Jesus was talking about: the poor (those who are hungry, thirsty and naked), the stranger, the sick, the incarcerated. In addition to these, who are the lowly of our day? Who are those whom no one seems to care for, the insignificant in the eyes of the world? The aged and the physically and mentally handicapped, certainly. Many around us are in desperate need of our love and compassion. These are the kind of people Jesus identifies with, and it is these whom he instructs us not to turn our backs on. He says we are to welcome them, receive them, and treat them with the same kind of generosity, love and respect that we would show to him and his Heavenly Father.

In her book, *Words to Love By*, Mother Teresa related how she put this truth into practice:

I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look at the individual. I can love only one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time. Just one, one, one. You get closer to Christ by coming closer to each other. As Jesus said, ‘Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.’ So you begin...I begin. I picked up one person—maybe if I didn’t pick up that one person I wouldn’t have picked up 42,000. The whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if I didn’t put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less. Same thing for you, same thing in your family, your community, your work, your school, your church—just begin...one, one, one.²

I saw this kind of radical love in action just this past week when my wife Amy and I had the privilege of hosting a Backyard Bible Club for young children. I was very impressed by the work of love our junior high and high school students invested in the lives of these children, teaching them Bible stories and memory verses and playing and praying with them. The little ones are sometimes

rude and disobedient, but our teenagers kept giving. They were not doing it for money or special perks; they were simply taking these words of Jesus to heart, lovingly serving the lowly in his name, changing the world one child at a time.

This notion of receiving the lowly in Jesus’ name reminds John of a man who was casting out demons in the Lord’s name but was not one of the twelve disciples.

B. Judging our hearts (9:38-48)

John said to Him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to hinder him because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not hinder him, for there is no one who shall perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is for us. (9:38-40)

A certain man, unlike the disciples in a recent episode, was actually able to cast out demons in the name of Christ, but because he was not one of the band of disciples, they tried to hinder him. It seems as though they felt they were the only ones “authorized” and blessed to minister in Jesus’ name. This attitude of exclusivity comes in many forms: pride, envy, selfishness, intolerance. I came across this poem which reflects these feelings:

Believe as I believe, no more, no less
That I am right, and no one else confess.
Feel as I feel, think as I think,
Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink,
Look as I look, do always as I do,
Then and only then, I’ll fellowship with you.³

Jesus corrects this and declares that no man could do a mighty work in his name and be his enemy. Just because the disciples had not heard of this man and knew nothing of his background or training was not grounds to disqualify him from ministering to others in the name of Jesus. The casting out of demons was done by God’s power, and that power was not limited to the twelve. Did the disciples think using Jesus’ name was a magical formula that would bring success to anyone who called upon it? Jesus makes the point that people can do miracles in his name only if they are in a proper relationship with him. They could not in one moment believe in him and do a miracle in his name and at the next turn against him and vilify him. Thus Jesus lays down for his disciples the great principle: *“He who is not against us is for us.”* He opposed the disciples’ attitude of exclusivity with an open and generous spirit.

This text is a warning to us that we are not to alienate others or be quick to judge them simply because they go to a different church or worship in a different way from us. If they glorify the name of Jesus, and enter the battle against Satan and his demons, then they are our brothers and sisters. We need to recognize who our real enemy is. Our battle is not against the liberals, the charismatics, the Baptists, the Presbyterians or the Catholics, but against Satan. We are at war against him for the lives of unbelievers. Shame on us if we waste our energies battling one another.

To help his disciples discern who it is that is “for them” and who it is that is “against them,” Jesus paints two vivid pictures. Verses 41-42:

For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you,

he shall not lose his reward. And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea.”

The first picture is that of a man who notices that the disciples are weary and parched from a long and hard journey. He sees their need and recognizes them as Christ's followers and, being willing to identify himself with them and their Master, receives them and offers refreshment along the way. According to Jesus, even such a small act as this is evidence that that man is for us. It is not the expense involved or the size of the gift that matters; it is the motivation of the heart of the giver that makes the difference. This man gives the water because he wants to help in the cause of Christ.

On my office wall I have pinned a few hand-made notes of encouragement and faith that have ministered to my parched soul in the past. On Valentine's Day, I got a card that says on the outside, "*Jesus Loves Me*" and "*Love one Another.*" On the inside it says, "*Dear Andy, Have a happy Valentine's Day. I think you are a great Pastor. Andrew Gately.*" Another card I received during my week ministering in Mexico read:

Dear Andy, As a little girl living in a very small town in Pennsylvania, a team of young people from a Bible College came to our church. They sang "His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches over me." I sang it over and over, it meant so much to me, still does. Thinking of Elizabeth Elliot's prayer, she says it beautifully—'Father, you've given us all things good and we thank you from our hearts. Follow the Shepherd. He knows the way—I will fear no evil for Thou are with me. That's His promise.' I have your picture on my refrigerator door so I won't forget to pray for you every day, Andy. Your responsibility is great. God knows your needs. And 'He will supply all your needs according to His riches' (Phil. 4:19). Telling the Mexican children of Jesus' love and how they can live for Jesus is one of the most important things you can do. Thank you for doing it for us back in Sunnyvale. Love you. Marge Sterling.

And just this past week, knowing how preoccupied we've been hosting a Backyard Bible Club, three families from this body provided meals for our family. All these gestures mean so much. They refresh and strengthen us for ministry. May we all be on the lookout for those ministering in Jesus' name who are in need of a word of encouragement or an act of kindness to refresh their spirits. Those who have so richly blessed us will receive their reward in full.

The second picture painted for the disciples is that of man who is "against" them and their ministry to the lowly. Instead of tenderly caring for a person in need, and encouraging him to walk in the way of the Lord either by his actions or neglect, he causes one who is easily influenced to fall into sin. This kind of man will not go unrewarded either. For him is reserved the harsh judgment: "*it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea.*" This kind of death would be better than causing another to fall into sin. Matthew and Luke put it this way: Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come (Matt 18:7; Luke 17:1).

Jesus has told his disciples that whether a person is "for

them" or "against them" is not determined by his membership in the twelve, it is evident by the fruit of his heart. Is he encouraging the lowly and building them up in their walk with God or is he causing them to fall down in their faith and leading them into sin? The apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary" (Gal 6:7-9).

Halfway into his discourse, Jesus turns the tables on his disciples and tells them that they must examine the fruit of their hearts, too. What is true for others is also true for them. They too will reap what they sow, whether for good or evil. Verses 43-49:

And if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than having your two hands, to go into hell (Gehenna), into the unquenchable fire, [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than having your two feet, to be cast into hell (Gehenna), [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched]. And if your eye causes you to stumble, cast it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into hell (Gehenna), where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire."

Jesus sets two clear alternatives before the disciples. One is called "life," or "the kingdom of God," and the other is called "hell," or "Gehenna." Gehenna was a valley located just outside of Jerusalem that was used as a garbage dump. There refuse was burned and the bodies of executed criminals were discarded. Fires smoldered there continuously and worms crawled through the garbage. It was a repulsive, ugly and foul place which came to symbolize a place of eternal waste—the fate of those who rebelled against God.

The violent images of cutting off hands and feet and tearing out eyes are shocking. That is exactly what Jesus has in mind. Seeking to impress the seriousness of this matter indelibly upon the hearts of the disciples, he uses startling metaphors to show that enjoying life in the kingdom of God is worth the most costly sacrifice.

I do not believe Jesus is speaking literally, because even if we were to cut off a hand or foot or pluck out an eye we would still have the other one left. Besides, these are not the source of our sin anyway. Our body parts do not act independently of our will. It is our heart that is the center and source of our sin. Jesus is not calling for physical mutilation of the body but for spiritual surgery of our heart and soul.

We must deal drastically with sin, which is to the inner soul what a cancerous tumor is to the body: it spreads, and if it is left unchecked it will eventually cause death. Halfway measures will not do. Whatever in our lives perverts our hearts and leads us into sin must be removed promptly and decisively, just as a surgeon would amputate a hand or a foot to save a life.

These images of the hand, foot and eye encompass the totality of life. They help us think through the areas of our life where we must deal decisively with sin. Here are some questions we face. With regard to our feet, are there places or events we go to that lead us into sin? With regard to our hands, are we engaging in any activities or habits that are in direct disobedience to the will of God? And how about our eyes? What are we reading or watching that lead us into temptation?

C. Submitting to the fiery trials of purification (9:49-50)

Jesus is telling the disciples that the road to greatness involves not only loving the lowly, and not only examining and judging themselves, it also involves submitting to the fiery trials they will soon face for the purpose of purification. Look at what he says. Verse 49:

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” (9:49-50)

It's tempting to compromise with the world and become adulterated with its priorities and values. When that happens, we lose our saltiness, our effectiveness as agents of change in our crooked and perverse generation. Fiery trials will be sprinkled throughout our lives. If we humbly submit to them before the Lord, they will do their work in us, burning off the impurities of our hearts and revealing the glory of Christ. The apostle Peter expressed the same idea when he wrote: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Pet 4:12-13).

I believe that what Jesus is telling his disciples here in very serious terms is not that they can lose their salvation, but that if they choose to live contrary to the way of the kingdom that he is setting forth, then their lives will be wasted. If they do not judge themselves, and submit to the fiery trials of purification, rejecting the ways and thinking of the world, then they will be like salt that has lost its saltiness. If they continue to quarrel and compete against one another instead of serving the lowly and being at peace with one another, then they will no longer be able to season and preserve life in their decaying world.

Ken Gire in his book *The Reflective Life*, writes: “Most of us, I think, genuinely want humility. But who of us is willing to be humiliated in order to get it? We are told in the Scriptures that God gives grace...people who have been brought low and humbled (James 4:6). If that is true, then whatever happens in our lives to humble us is, in the long run, a good thing, because it paves the road over which the grace of God comes to us.”

It is by that grace that we are able to love the lowly, judge ourselves, and submit to times of persecution and testing. By his grace these produce within us a genuine humility and servant heart that allows us to be at peace with one another.

Who will *Time* magazine choose as the greatest person of the 20th century? Based on this passage from Mark's gospel, who would you choose? Who has given his or her life to loving the lowly? Who has severely judged the sin in his or her life? Who has submitted humbly to the fiery trials of life? I can think of some in our body whom I would vote for, but none of them made the magazine's list of 100. I believe the only individual on that list that comes close to exhibiting the kind of greatness we have discussed this morning is Mother Teresa. Asked why she sacrificed everything to serve the lowest of the low in the slums of Calcutta, she said, “*Because I see in their face the face of Jesus. I do what I do because I love Jesus; we do it for Jesus, to Jesus, and with Jesus.*”

It is appropriate that we celebrate communion after reflecting on this text, because it is only through the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf that we know what true greatness is. The apostle Paul wrote these words to the Philippians:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. *Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” (Phil 2:3-11)

Jesus lived and modeled the radical life of a servant, loving the lowly even unto death itself. It is only by His Spirit working within us that we are able to love and serve in this way.

As the bread is being passed, I encourage you to go before your loving Heavenly Father and examine your heart, confessing before him the areas of sin in your life.

The Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” (1 Cor 11:23-25)

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1. Norman Pearlstine, Editor-In-Chief of *Time* magazine, April 13, 1998.
2. Mother Teresa, *Words to Love By* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1989) 7, 79.
3. From a sermon by J. David, *Servant Ministry*, on Mark 9:30-40.



LIBERTY TO LEAVE OR FREED TO LOVE

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 Mark 10:1-12
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 Brian Morgan

We celebrate our country's 223rd birthday on this Fourth of July day. In 1776, our nation was born in a celebration of freedom from tyranny and a willingness to risk life to preserve that freedom for future generations. More than two centuries later, we are still willing to put our sons' lives in harm's way to preserve these same freedoms even in other nations. Freedom is a precious commodity. It is hard won and must be tenaciously preserved.

So far so good. But if we take a closer look into the soul of our nation on our national holiday, we sense great sadness when we recognize how far we have drifted in the last hundred years. While our forefathers wisely recognized that a nation's citizens could not enjoy freedom without exercising responsibility, today we have become a people who live for our personal freedoms but show little concern for our responsibilities toward God, family, or community. The result is that we live under the tyranny of sin.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the home. In 1910, the national divorce rate was one divorce for every ten marriages. Today it is one in two. Here in Silicon Valley, there are twice as many divorces as marriages. Marriage as an institution is held in such low regard that cohabitation has replaced courtship. Multi-billion dollar industries promote infidelity, fornication and adultery, and their financial success grows exponentially and unchallenged. And the cost? One in four females and one in five males are sexually abused as children. We have become a nation that exercises freedom without restraint. The private lives of many look more like Sodom and Gomorrah than "America the Beautiful."

Speaking of Israel many centuries ago, the prophet Jeremiah said,

"Were they ashamed because of the abomination they have done?"

They were not even ashamed at all;

They did not even know how to blush." (Jer 6:15)

In America today, we don't blush either. We parade our shame on talk show television, and America applauds. It's a miracle that our nation holds together at all.

But, lest we despair, let us remember that it was in times like these that the kingdom of God was born. Israel's reigning king divorced one wife for an incestuous relationship, and when challenged by a prophet, he received that prophet's head on a platter. The religious es-

tablishment had made divorce an easy out for husbands, leaving many wives destitute, so that "the whole Greek way of life made companionship between man and wife next to impossible" (Barclay). An ancient proverb put it this way:

*We have harlots for our pleasure,
 concubines for daily physical use,
 wives to bring up legitimate children
 and to be faithful stewards in household matters.*
 (4th century B.C. quote by Demosthenes)

It was in that sea of moral chaos that Jesus instructed his disciples in a different way—the way to be fully human. It is the way of the kingdom, the way of the cross. We pick up our story in the gospel of Mark at a critical juncture, when Jesus is about to take his first steps towards his destiny in Jerusalem.

I. Marriage and the Kingdom (10:1-12)

A. A Question about Divorce (10:1-2)

And rising up, He went from there to the region of Judea, and beyond the Jordan; and crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them. (Mark 10:1, NASB)

Jesus now leaves Peter's home in Capernaum and begins his final pilgrimage to Judea by way of the Transjordan, the very route which pilgrims took to make their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Mention of Judea brings our Lord's predictions of his passion into view and raises extreme interest on the events to follow. Even out on the pilgrim's highway, Jesus attracts huge crowds. As was his custom, he takes time to give them what they needed most: teaching—wondrous, captivating teaching on the kingdom of God. This is a reminder to us of what we need most on our pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem, and that is a constant, steady diet of the word of God. Nothing else will quench the thirst of our parched souls.

In the midst of this setting now a number of Pharisees question Jesus on "a point of Torah where he was thought to be suspect, and where some political pressure could be applied or threatened" (Tom Wright). These men raise a topic of heated controversy among the Jews, centered around a man's right to divorce his wife. Verse 2:

And some Pharisees came up to Him, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife.

“In view of Herod’s incestuous marriage to his sister-in-law Herodias, the question had a sharp political edge.”¹ After all, the last person to challenge Herod’s divorce was beheaded. As Edersheim suggests, the purpose of the test at this particular juncture was so that “by getting Christ to commit Himself against divorce in Perea—the territory of Herod—they might enlist against him, as formerly against the Baptist, the implacable hatred of Herodias.”² No matter what answer Jesus gave it was inevitable that it would create enemies, for the issue of divorce was hotly contested even among the Jews. All permitted divorce; the only question that remained was, on what grounds was divorce justified? Matthew’s account adds the phrase, “for any cause at all,” thereby identifying the point of contention in the rabbinical debate.

The controversy sprang from different interpretations of Deut 24:1, which states:

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some *indecent* in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves...”

This law provided legal protection for a wife’s release from the authority of her husband once she was divorced. With a legal document in her hand her former husband could not reclaim her, thus she was free to marry another. The point at issue for the rabbis concerned what constituted an “unseemly thing.” According to Emil Shürer,

The more rigorous house of Shammai expounded the vague phrase literally as a ‘thing of nakedness’, i.e., some form of immorality. But the general understanding was that any kind of marriage breakdown qualified a husband to divorce his wife. [There was, and still is, no question in Jewish law of a woman divorcing her husband.] The school of Hillel even went so far as to define [the indecency] as a spoiled dinner. And Rabbi Akiba taught that a man was justified in putting away his wife if he had found another, prettier woman. In fact, divorce was relatively easy in those days and the Pharisees and rabbis intended to keep it so.³

The question is, Where would Jesus stand in the controversy? Would he ally himself with Akiba, Hillel, or Shammai? Or would he risk death and take his stand with John the Baptist, placing himself under the wrath of Herod?

B. The Answer Focused on Creation (10:3-9)

And He answered and said to them, “What did Moses command you?” And they said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” (10:3-4)

Posing the question, “What did Moses command you?” Jesus drives the Pharisees right back to Moses’ stricture. In response, they promptly quote the text in

question from Deuteronomy, but give no explanation of the term “indecent.” Perhaps they are hoping Jesus will amplify it and thus commit himself.

And commit himself he does, but on entirely different grounds. Verse 5:

But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh; consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” (10:5-9)

Jesus changes the focus of the question from “what?” to “why?”—a question the rabbis never thought to ask. Why did Moses give such a commandment? Jesus asks. The answer is that Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of their hearts. Better to live in peace in isolation than together in a war zone. But clearly, this was not God’s original intention, as is evident in what Moses commanded concerning marriage in the creation account. Pressing the boundaries of divorce caused the rabbis to lose sight of the greater picture and purpose of marriage. As Cranfield carefully delineates:

A distinction has to be made between that which sets forth the absolute will of God, and those provisions which take account of men’s actual sinfulness and are designed to limit and control its consequences. [In contrast to the ten commandments,] Deut 24:1 is a divine provision to deal with situations brought about by men’s [hardness of heart] and to protect from its worst effects those who would suffer as a result of it ...The error of the Rabbis’ interpretation lay in their losing sight of this distinction and so imagining that Deut 24:1 meant that God allowed divorce, in the sense that it had his approval...When our sinfulness traps us in a position in which the choices still open to us are evil, we are to choose that which is least evil, asking for God’s forgiveness and comforted by it, but not pretending that the evil is good.⁴

As Jesus is about to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth he insists that he will not focus on what is permitted due to sin, but on what God is creating in the midst of life. Viewed in that light, marriage is the process of two becoming one: a man leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife. Marriage is the only human relationship that constitutes “one flesh.” Governed by these irrevocable vows, marriage, for better or worse, is for all time, “until death do us part.” Most important of all, having yoked two into one in marriage, God is at work, sanctifying and conforming them to his image. “Therefore what God has joined let not man separate.”

What a turnaround! The Pharisees asked Jesus for his view of divorce and he gives them his view of marriage. Marriage, says Jesus, is to be highly esteemed, exalted, and tenaciously guarded. If divorce occurs as the terri-

ble choice of a lesser evil, let us weep until we have no more tears, because of the hardness of heart and the devastation that divorce leaves in its wake.

There have been four divorces in our immediate family, leaving many victims in their wake and decades of ramifications to follow: children who never recovered and found solace in drugs; three nervous breakdowns; immeasurable hurt in spouses and a painful relapse into alcoholism that led to a premature death at the age of 38. So Jesus reminds us, “What God has yoked together, let not man separate.”

Jesus’ refusal to bend the created order and even discuss what Moses permitted is a bit of a shock to the disciples. Later, they question him to make sure they heard him correctly.

C. In the House with the Disciples (10:10-12)

And in the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. And He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.”

The disciples are astounded by what Jesus has just said. They know themselves and are aware of how difficult it is to live in close proximity with someone for any length of time. As I was getting off an airplane recently, I asked a man who was holding two dozen roses, “Are you getting married?” “Married?” he said. “Are you crazy?” That’s the way society thinks today, and why living together has practically replaced marriage. We know we are incapable of maintaining soft, tender and sensitive hearts. We say “being in love” is an infatuation that will soon die once the reality of day to day living sets in. This is why Hollywood is so preoccupied with sex that is void of commitment and pornography that offers sex without relationship. Deep down we know we are incapable of long-term, lasting relationships, so why not at least indulge ourselves in a little animalistic pleasure along our painful paths? Before I got married, I worked in a construction job in downtown Los Angeles. When my co-laborers heard I was getting married, practically everyone, to a man, took me aside privately to encourage me to reconsider. Some even told me to experiment with sex, with no restraint, and I would discover it wasn’t worth getting married for. I wasn’t sorry to disappoint them.

But Jesus reaffirms that the disciples heard him correctly. He refuses to yield an inch of ground lest he compromise the divine order. Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. You may divorce her, but you will never remove that mystery of divine oneness. She is still a spouse, and the act of remarriage constitutes adultery. The same holds true if a woman divorces a man and marries another. So while the Pharisees quibble over what constitutes “indecency” in a woman, Jesus condemns them as adulterers.

Pressed against the wall of ethical purity, Matthew records the disciples’ reaction. Their words are a revealing echo of our own hearts: “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry” (Matt 19:10). They were saying, “If there is no way out, we don’t want in!”

II. Ethics and Eschatology

But there is something deeper here than our Lord’s upholding holy standards which leave us all in a state of condemnation. By focusing on “creation,” and speaking of “hardness of heart,” Jesus is hinting that there is more involved in marriage than ethics and a dogged determination to maintain them. No, with the coming of the kingdom of God, Jesus is inaugurating a “new creation” that will remove that dreaded “hardness of heart.” Therefore the issue is much larger than the individual and his or her marriage vows. It has to do with eschatology.⁵ Jesus is the culmination of the love story of God and his people.

The Old Testament describes God’s relationship with his people, using the metaphor of marriage and utilizing three different terms for love, which drives God’s heart. The first term, the Hebrew word *ahavah* (love), speaks of God’s affections which he placed on Israel for no reason, causing him to *choose* that nation out of all the nations of the earth, and leading to a life-long commitment sealed by a covenant (Deut 7:6-10). Once that covenant was in place, the term for love changed from *ahavah* to *hesed*,⁶ which is best translated “loyal-love.” This word speaks of God’s ardent desire to cultivate loyalty, kindness and grace, all because he has taken an oath. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once exhorted a couple he was marrying, “From this day forth, it is not love which makes your commitment strong, it is commitment that makes your love strong.”

But tragically, though God remained loyal to his people, they were continually hardhearted and faithless. Israel became an adulteress, going after multitudes of lovers. After centuries of apostasy which brought warnings from the prophets, God was forced to write a *certificate of divorce* and send her into exile. But even then, with Israel in forced solitude and depraved servitude, God’s affections stirred. He could not let go of his *compassion* for her, so the prophets wrote of a new day when he would seek and find her. He would wash her with the purest of water and make her clean (Ezek 36:25; John 3:5), and there in the wilderness they would re-enact their wedding vows (Isa 54:4-10). But this time it would be all new, for he would remove her heart of stone and give her a heart of flesh. He would even place his very Spirit inside her (Ezek 36:26-27). With this covenant renewal their marriage would outlast history.

What a love story! In this account in Mark, Jesus knows that that day has dawned in himself—a time when hard hearts will be a thing of the past. The new covenant restores God’s original intentions in creation and elevates and magnifies them to new dimensions.

This is why Jesus dismisses the passage which the Pharisees quoted. Tom Wright explains that it was “part of a temporary phase in the purposes of YHWH. It was necessary because of the ambiguous situation, in which Israel was called to be the people of God, but was still a people with hard hearts.”⁷ But now the last days have dawned, and with them a renewal of the covenant and a renewal of hearts. So Jesus’ refusal of Moses’ permission indicates that hard heartedness has been dealt with and henceforth the law will be written on the hearts of Yahweh’s people. As God’s elect we are now freed from sin that hardens, and are empowered to love like God loves.

III. Marriage and the New Creation

All of this has significant implications for marriage. Paul writes that marriage is a holy stage where a couple acts out the love story of God and his people (Eph 5:22-33). Affections are stirred, and they culminate in an irrevocable commitment which drives the marriage for better or worse. When wrong creeps in and creates emotional damage, forgiveness and compassion redirect, cleanse and heal. After twenty-seven years of marriage, I have found over and over again how easy it is to give in to a hard heart, but, on the other hand, with the presence of the Holy Spirit in our marriage, how just one word from the other partner can unlock it and melt our hearts with just an ounce of compassion. Paul did permit divorce and remarriage if a Christian was married to an unbeliever and the unbeliever wanted to leave. Christians partners were allowed to separate but not to divorce to marry another (1 Cor 7:10-16). To those who have been divorced, we must remember the apostle’s inspired words, “if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17).

The apostles so caught on to this concept of renewed hearts they expected their earliest converts to show tenderness and affection even in the most evil circumstances. In Acts, Paul and Silas, wrongly accused, were thrown into prison for their faith. Their limbs were shackled, their backs bloodied raw. Instead of crying out for vengeance, however, they sang hymns of thanksgiving. And when God answered with an earthquake, and the walls of the prison tumbled down, instead of rejoicing over a jailer’s potential suicide, they allowed God’s compassion to overflow, and the bloody victims offered the gift of salvation to their captor. Later, safe under his roof, they loved him with an unrestrained love as he washed their wounds in his tears (Acts 16:19-34).

If that is the kind of love our new hearts produce—a love that breaks through the walls of our enemies—how much more ought it overflow with the wife of our youth! Let us repent of our hard-heartedness. Let us

stop grieving the Holy Spirit and allow the “new creation,” which is driven by affection, loyal-love and compassion, to continue unhindered.

In light of this text, I thought it would be appropriate to renew my own wedding vows to my wife Emily.

June 17, 1992

Emily,

*Since you are so precious in my sight,
since you are honored and I love you,
since my delight is in you and I rejoice in you,
I will pour my life into you.*

I will give you a title of honor as the equal heir of grace.

I will be patient and understanding, loving you as the weaker vessel in and out of season, basing my love not on circumstances or emotion, but out of obedience to Christ, laying hold of His resources to love you.

I promise to be a leader and to gird you in His truth with an everlasting salvation, satisfying your needs as a woman with good things, to present you holy and blameless before Him.

And even to your graying years will I love you, and bear you, and carry you, and deliver you, never to depart from you, that all flesh will know that I, Brian, am your husband, and you, Emily, are my wife. Amen.

And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity (Col 3:12-14).

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1. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 284

2. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 2:332.

3. Emil Shürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979) 2:486.

4. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1959) 319-320.

5. Eschatology is the study of last things. The NT teaches that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God on earth, and thus the last days began at Pentecost (Acts 2:17) and continue until his glorious return (2 Tim 3:1; Heb 1:2; Jas 5:3; 1 Pet 1:20; 4:7ff; 2 Pet 3:3).

6. *Hesed* is the most important theological term in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is this wonderful attribute in God that drives salvation history to its faithful climax. Even when all of life falls apart, it is this quality that Jeremiah looks to in Lamentations as the key that will rebuild Israel’s future out of the ruins (Lam 3:22-23).

7. Wright, 285.



THE QUESTION OF ETERNAL LIFE

Catalog No. 1129

Mark 10:13-31

28th Message

Brian Morgan

July 11th, 1999

In the tenth chapter of the gospel of Mark, Jesus is teaching on the “way” of the kingdom of God. Miraculously, the eyes of the disciples have been opened to see that Jesus is the Messiah, but they have no idea as to what the way of the Messiah entails.

Modern-day Christians are often equally as blind. That is why this teaching that we will look at this morning is essential to discipleship. It is not an elective; it is basic to the foundation of the kingdom. When different parties disagreed over this issue, which they did vehemently, Jesus was anything but cordial in his response. These are not religious niceties. Jesus would not tolerate different points of view in the things that mattered. This is extremely helpful material for Christians to know where we must stand firm and refuse to compromise. In some issues we are given latitude, but others hold the very fabric of the kingdom together. If we attempt to pull out these threads, the whole fabric will unravel.

In our last study, Jesus was tested on his view of divorce. His answer left both enemies and disciples astonished. Having just finished his discourse on the sanctity of marriage, and God’s commitment to a new creation, a number of parents now bring their children to Jesus, hoping that he might lay his hands on them. The result is that the children become essential teaching aids on the topic of eternal life and how we must enter into it.

I. Easy Access to the King (10:13-16)

And they began bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, “Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all.” And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands upon them. (NASB)

Picture the Messiah here, taking his first steps toward his destiny in Jerusalem. Breaking in on that scene of sacred pilgrimage now come a number of parents, their toddlers in tow, seeking his blessing for them. The disciples, eager to protect Jesus’ pilgrimage from a children’s invasion, respond like holy policemen: they voice a harsh rebuke for the whole operation. (Mark is ambiguous as to whether they rebuked the children or the parents who brought them.) The spontaneous parade is shut down, and Jesus’ dignity is preserved. But to their surprise, Jesus becomes indignant, and he directly confronts and rebukes the traffic police. Jesus seldom displayed impatience or anger, but when something threatened the very fabric of the kingdom, he inserted himself with forceful emotion. In fact, the Greek term for indignation, *eganaktesen*, is so

strong it is omitted by both Matthew and Luke. This indicates that the stakes are high, and that what follows should command our attention.

Not only does Jesus want the children to come to him, he even assigns God’s kingdom to them, saying, “*for the kingdom belongs to such as these.*” The clear intimation is, don’t shuffle the children offstage to make way for the VIP class. There are two reasons for this. Children are not second class citizens. They are full recipients of the kingdom, and they are at the very center of God’s rule. This is why I allow children to partake in communion, even before they are old enough to be baptized. Secondly, children play a significant role for the rest of us. Keeping children in our midst serves as a constant reminder of how one receives the kingdom. In fact, this is the sixth occasion¹ in the gospel of Mark where children receive immediate access to Jesus, and get his full attention. They are given as examples to teach us about the kingdom of God. Children never bend to propriety or protocol when they approach someone whose attention they want to gain. They come empty handed, claiming life as a gift. How often has a child shattered the stuffy air of pomp and circumstance when properly inserted into a formal affair! Such delightful occurrences reduce us to our most basic human selves.

Keeping children in our midst serves to remind us that we humbly receive the kingdom of God as a gift, by faith. This is the sole entrance to the kingdom. In fact, David says that this is how he first learned to trust² God—while nursing at his mother’s breast (Psa 22:9). Children remind us that it is the weak and the poor, those “such as these,” that are most likely to have such faith; thus we need to keep them at the center of our communities.

So, don’t shut the children out. Be thankful for them, for they are central to life. Healthy communities welcome, integrate and rejoice in children. I sometimes wonder what possesses real estate developers to plan retirement communities and describe them as “paradise,” when children are barred from them. Such environments often become cold and sterile, because they are bereft of life. Do not plan for a retirement separated from children. My wish for you is, may your tribe increase! I would exhort singles to attach themselves to a ministry or family that has children. It is vital for discipleship.

Jesus seals his rebuke by modeling the right response to children: He takes them in his arms and hugs them “and thereby dramatizes his approval” (Gundry, 545). Then he lays his hands on them, giving each one a blessing, yoking them to the God of Israel—a dramatic way to say that little ones have full status in the kingdom of God. So, let the children come. Stop hindering them.

The text now moves from children who, although coming empty handed, have immediate access to Jesus, to a young man who finds troubling barriers in his approach to

the Lord.

II. Access Denied (10:17-31)

A. All Things Good 10:17-19

And as He was setting out on the way, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and began asking Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:17)

In contrast to the children, the one who now enters the scene approaches Jesus in what we would call a politically correct way. This one is eager, so he runs; he is humble, so he bows; he is respectful, granting Jesus the highest accolade of “Good Teacher”; and he asks the right question: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

It is important to understand that to the Jews, eternal life did not mean living forever after passing from this world. Rather, as Tom Wright suggests, it meant, “What must I do to have a share in the age to come, to be among those who are vindicated when YHWH acts decisively and becomes king?” All Jews were awaiting the coming of YHWH to end Israel’s exile, bring vindication over her enemies and establish God’s rule worldwide. That was when the age to come would be born. The question was, who would have a share in that age?

Jesus responds to the man:

And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” (10:18-19)

Before directing the man back to the normal Jewish starting place, i.e., the ten commandments, Jesus confronts him with the blunt enquiry, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.” The question had set the tone for his answer, which backs the man into a corner. Now he will be forced to rethink everything about his life, the commandments, God and the Messiah. This one, who before this meeting had his life neatly arranged, is about to have it all unravel before his eyes. With that question probing his heart, Jesus quotes six of the ten commandments, all of which address the man’s responsibility to his neighbor, to preserve his life, home, possessions and reputation—commandments he well knows.

B. One Thing Lacking (10:20-22)

And he said to Him, “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.” (10:20)

The man appears relieved with Jesus’ answer. Carefully removing the word “good” from his address, he confesses that he has kept all these commands since his youth. Like the student who has just “aced” an exam, he awaits his grade with confidence.

And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him, and said to him, “One thing you lack go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But at these words his face fell, and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property. (10:21-22)

Having heard his confident answer, Jesus looks at him with a penetrating gaze that bores deep into his soul.

While we might be turned off by the man’s quick reply and naive confidence, Jesus is not. He loves him deeply, and wants him for a disciple. But before he can be a disciple, he has to know the truth about himself: he is an absolute failure! Jesus explains that he lacks just one thing, yet that one thing is everything: “Sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven.”

Jesus identifies his one weakness. He was a man of means, but sadly, his money had stolen away his affections from God. The man was guilty of violating the second commandment; other gods had replaced his love for YHWH. And though he might have had an upright reputation in the community and synagogue, at heart he was an idolater. In order to deal with that idolatry and have a share in the age to come, Jesus tells him to sell everything and give it to the poor, and then, “come follow Me.” How different is Jesus’ answer from that which we hear from modern day preachers. “Give to the church,” they cry. Then, unfortunately, no one disciples the “rich.” Whatever happened to discipleship? This was a radical invitation to discipleship, the identical one that was given to the twelve. And notice that it demanded the same loyalty to Jesus that the Law gave to God in the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods in preference to me” (Deut 5:7).

But rather than brightening the man’s face and enlivening his heart, this invitation causes his face to fall and his heart to grieve. It is only after his response that we learn from Mark that he was a man of means. Instead of heeding the call, like Peter, Andrew, James, John and Matthew, this young man went away grieved, bound up by his many possessions which possessed him.

As radical as this demand to “sell all” sounds to us, it would have had an even sharper edge to Jews, due to its profound theological implications. Tom Wright explains:

For most people in the ancient world the most basic possession was land; for Jews, the land was of course the holy land, promised by YHWH to his people. It was because of the Roman registration of the holy land that Judas the Galilean had started his revolution in AD 6. Just as Israel had “inherited” the land in the first place, land would be the most basic inheritance that a father could leave to his children.³

No one parted with ancestral land in Israel. Even when property rights were lost through incurred debt, in the Year of Jubilee they reverted back to the original heirs. Maintaining land meant securing their rights to their inheritance and continuity as the people of God. Now, just when Israel has returned to their land after exile, Jesus tells this young man to sell his share and follow him. This would not be possible were it not for the fact that Jesus was indeed creating a “new land,” of which the original “holy land” was a mere shadow. And this new, heavenly land would fill the whole creation in the age to come.⁴

III. Breaking the Barriers (10:23-31)

A. The Impossibility of Access (10:23-25)

And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through

the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

The man came running to Jesus seeking eternal life, but he cannot pay the price, so he departs. As a cloud of sadness settles on the scene, Jesus turns to his disciples and says that the man was not an isolated case; he represented all who are wealthy. It was extremely difficult for people of means to enter the kingdom of God. This statement shocked the disciples. Most Jews assumed from the teaching of Deuteronomy and many of the Psalms that wealth was a symbol of God’s blessing—and if anyone had a share in the age to come, it was the wealthy. “The real question was, who else? But Jesus was saying that the rich were not only not automatically in the covenant, but most likely outside it” (Tom Wright).

Seeing the amazement of the disciples, Jesus draws out a metaphor that pushes the boundaries even further. Addressing them with the affectionate, *children*,⁵ he draws them into the imaginative world of impossibility:

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

For his metaphor, Jesus chooses a camel, whose height, awkward gait and heavy burden were a source of humor, even as it tried to negotiate the narrow openings around Jerusalem. Now, by means of hyperbole, consider that same camel passing through the eye of a needle.⁶ Jesus has made his point. What is impossible for the camel is more than impossible for the rich.

B. The Miracle of Access (10:26-27)

And they were even more astonished and said to Him, “Then who can be saved?” Looking upon them, Jesus said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.”

Now the disciples are even more astonished. If this is true, “Then who can be saved?” they ask. “If a pious person whose wealth is a sign of God’s favor will not be saved, then what hope of deliverance from hellfire does someone without that sign have?”⁷

For a third time in our text (vv 21, 23, 27) Jesus casts his gaze upon his students and announces that with men it is impossible, but not with God. God can do all things. Reflecting on this image of the camel and all things being possible, C. S. Lewis penned these lines:

All things are possible, it’s true.
But picture how the camel feels, squeezed out
In one bloody thread from tail to snout.

Yes, for God all things are possible. God can take a rich, self-assured, proud individual and cause him to have the faith of a child. God can take the rich, who are obsessed with stock options, public offerings and venture capital, and make them live with abandon because of their love for little ones.

As the disciples see Jesus’ eyes fixed upon them and hear his amazing words, the light begins to dawn on them. God had already worked that very miracle on their hearts. Peter and Andrew had left their fishing nets to follow Jesus. James and John had left their father and the family business. Matthew had walked away from his profitable tax collector’s booth. They had given up families, children, careers, landholdings, reputations—all to follow Jesus.

As Peter’s illumined heart becomes aware of the mystery, he blurts out his sense of excitement as only he can do.

IV. Inheriting True Riches (10:28-31)

A. Entering In

Peter began to say to Him, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You.” (10:28)

Yes, these twelve had left everything to follow Jesus, and Peter is rather enthusiastic about that. Can they therefore confidently expect to receive their share of eternal life in the age to come? Upon hearing Peter’s enthusiasm, Jesus further clarifies their understanding of eternal life and the age to come.

B. Experiencing the Future Now

Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.” (10:29-30)

Jesus carefully points out that they won’t have to wait until they die to enjoy their inheritance. The future is invading the “now” present. So whatever they left to follow him they shall receive back, not when they get to heaven, but now, and not just in full measure, but exponentially more—a hundred times more!⁸ Notice two things here. First, to experience eternal life there must be a leaving of every blood relationship, with the exception of marriage,⁹ for the sake of the kingdom. (Paul says that Peter took his wife along on his apostolic journeys, 1 Cor 9:5). This indicates that all our family relationships are but temporary places of nurture.

Secondly, notice what drives the process of entering into eternal life. Ironically, it is persecution: *fleeing your pursuers*. Following Jesus meant that the disciples might have to live like David, who spent his early years in a wilderness escaping the demon-tipped spear of King Saul. But even if they have to “flee from their pursuers to as many as a hundred different places, they will find [refuge] through the hospitality of fellow believers.”¹⁰ So, eternal life is experienced in a new community, one that is bonded in love, through hospitality.

I cannot over-emphasize how important hospitality is to the kingdom of God. I experienced the sweetest joys of eternal life when I was forced to flee persecutors in a foreign country and became totally dependent on the hospitality of Christians. The holy love outweighed the danger, forging lifetime relationships in the process.

So Jesus says we don’t have to wait to experience eternal life; it is mysteriously invading the present, until it culminates on that great day. And the greater the pain, the greater the life.

To this good news, Jesus adds one final word.

C. Remaining Faithful

“But many who are first, will be last; and the last, first.” (10:31)

Here is a warning to Peter and the others to not become complacent. The final judgment will be filled with many surprises. Don't assume that those who start well will finish well. As Cranfield states: "One who is at present a refuser may in the future by God's mercy accept the call and even in the age to come be preferred to them, while their having left all is not in itself a guarantee that they will continue to remain faithful. (Judas was one of the twelve, Paul was not.)"¹¹

As I get older, I find these last words of Jesus especially probing. I began the Christian life well. I forsook possible riches for poverty, faced painful rejection, endured hardship, and lost children. Yet my wife Emily and I have found the words of Christ to be absolutely true. In the years since we have been showered with eternal life. Everything we lost has been returned a hundredfold. A great many homes are the sweetest places of refuge for us, foreign cities a happy home, and fields of corn a sanctuary. I have lost children but now possess a nation of children. Never having had brothers, I now possess scores of brothers who are as dear to me as David's one Jonathan.

Now I am comfortable, having been well established in the same church for 25 years. I have a wonderful family: a wife to die for, three daughters who give me infinite joy, a godly son-in-law, a granddaughter, and a home I love. Yet, I find this text probing me. Am I willing to let go of my children, to allow God to mature them his way, not my way? Will I rejoice if God calls them to serve somewhere else, or to embrace poverty like I did? Am I available if God calls me to leave PBCC after 25 years to serve in another city, state, or country? I must confess that would be hard for me.

My spiritual father, David Roper, serves as a fine model for me. After serving faithfully as a pastor in two churches, he had the opportunity to retire. Many in his position might choose to homestead their wealth and play golf, or at the minimum seek fame on the conference circuit. Instead, David embraced poverty and started over again. He and his wife began a new ministry, serving unknown pastors in the back roads of Idaho. When from a distance I watch David and Carolyn caring for these "little people," I see a couple swimming in a sea of eternal life, as young in spirit as the day I met them. So pray for me, because when I grow up, I want to be like David.

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1. See Mark 5:23; 7:27; 9:17, 36, 42; 10:13.

2. The Hebrew word "trust" (*batach*) means to be "stretched out", "taut" like a bow, to "rely on"; in relation to God it means to give God one's full weight. There is no better image of this than that of a nursing infant lying totally limp on its mother's breast (Psa 22:9).

3. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 403.

4. On the boundaries of the Holy Land filling the whole creation with the coming of Jesus see Isa 54:2-3; Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13; Heb 12:8-9, 13-16; Rev 21-22d.

5. Robert Gundry (*Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993] 556) says that this "implies that in his amplification Jesus takes the authoritative role of a father to explain something which his disciples, childish in their failure to understand, have not grasped." It also links this text with the previous one regarding the importance of children and the necessity for the humility of faith.

6. C. E. B. Cranfield (*The Gospel according to St Mark* [Cambridge University Press, 1959] 332) remarks, "Procrustean attempts to reduce the camel to a rope (reading *kamilon* for *kamelon*) or to enlarge the needle's eye into a postern gate need not be taken seriously."

7. Gundry, 557.

8. Gundry, 558, suggests that "the order of the list reflects increasing value in a rural society: brothers being of least value to a man because they compete for the family inheritance; sisters of more value because they can be married off for a profit...; the mother of even greater value because of her labors on behalf of the family; the father of truly great value, because from him comes the inheritance; and farms of most value because they constitute the land that makes possible the family's existence from one generation to the next."

9. Luke in his summary of this account includes "wives" (Luke 18:29), but Matthew leaves it out (Matt 19:29) as does Mark here.

10. Gundry, 558.

11. Cranfield, 334.



THAT TERRIBLE CUP OF GREATNESS

Catalog No. 1130

Mark 10:32-45

29th Message

Brian Morgan

October 3rd, 1999

As we resume our studies in the gospel of Mark we come to the end of what scholars have labeled the “way”¹ section, 8:27-10:52. Through the method by which Mark has crafted his gospel we have observed that the journey of the disciples can be roughly divided into two sections. The first deals with the miracles and teaching of Jesus, which culminated in Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Messiah. From that point on, Jesus spends the rest of his ministry teaching the disciples the “way” of the Messiah.

The Christian life can also be divided into these two phases. The first phase is a miraculous journey which culminates in a miracle of sight: Jesus is the savior of the world, and Lord; then we spend the rest of our lives being shaped in the “way” of the Messiah. For many, this can be a much harder and more profound journey than conversion. A great many Christians are surprised and ill prepared for the “way” in which Jesus leads them after they come to Christ. Certainly, this was true of the disciples. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but they did not have a clue what that meant. They needed to be re-educated, a process which included three direct teachings by Jesus, bracketed by two miracles of sight (8:22-26; 10:46-52). This re-education in the “way” of the Messiah remains the major theme of Mark’s gospel all the way from the Mount of Transfiguration to the cross in Jerusalem.

I. Jesus Predicts His Own Destiny (10:32-34)

And they were on the road (lit. ‘way’), *going up* to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking on ahead of them; and they were amazed, but those who followed were fearful. And again He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen² to Him, saying, “Behold, *we are going up* to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him and spit upon Him, and scourge Him, and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.”

Jesus sets his face like a flint toward Jerusalem (Is 50:7), his final destiny. There he will boldly confront all the forces awaiting him. He fervently presses “toward the fate which he has predicted for himself,”³ amidst a dual atmosphere of amazement on the part of the crowd and fear on the part of his followers. The crowd, made up of pilgrims on their way to the Passover festival, is caught up with the thrill of Messianic expecta-

tion. But those closest to Jesus sense a supernatural foreboding filling the air, for what prophet was ever warmly received in Jerusalem? Indeed, few escaped alive (Mt 23:37). Sensing their fear, Jesus draws the twelve aside and for a third and final time explicitly tells them what awaits him in Jerusalem, so there will be no surprises.

Jesus opens with an emphatic “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem,” to make the point that his destiny will be their destiny too. It is critical for them to understand the “way” of their king.

Notice three things in this prediction. First, this is Jesus’ third explicit reference to his passion (8:31; 9:30,31). This reveals not only how central his passion is to the divine “way” of the kingdom, but also how slow the human heart is to accept what he has to say. If it was difficult for the disciples to hear these words, how much more so for us. But Jesus, ever patient and persistent, is determined to teach the twelve (and us by implication) until they fully understand it. This is *the* most important lesson for disciples, yet it is the most difficult to comprehend.

The second thing to note is how Jesus unabashedly uses the title “Son of Man” in reference to himself. This term is used fourteen times in Mark’s gospel. The image, which comes from Daniel 7:13,14, is used of a representative Israelite who will do battle with the pagan kingdoms of the world, which are depicted as ferocious animals. Having won the battle, he is depicted as “one like the son of man” coming on the clouds to be enthroned in heaven at Yahweh’s right hand to establish an everlasting kingdom. This was the image that seized the hearts of Jews in exile,⁴ the one they pinned their hopes on for the coming Messiah during their oppression at the hands of four different empires. Here, Jesus unabashedly claims that title for himself—a blasphemous claim were it not true.

Yet, the most surprising thing in this prediction is that this Son of Man is not described as conquering his enemies but as being conquered by them. As Jesus describes his final confrontation in Jerusalem, notice that all the verbs are passive, except for the last. He is handed over to the Sandhedrin, condemned to death, delivered over to the gentiles, who are allowed to mock him, spit on him and scourge him bloody raw, and finally kill him. Is this the divine way of Israel’s Son of Man? Appearing powerless before his enemies? Certainly, it is a mysterious way to be crowned king. Yet Jesus understood what no other rabbi or scribe in Israel had been

able to comprehend. He took the Daniel imagery not in isolation but in relation to other texts and prophecies. As he studied the prophets he was able to take this glorious title, Son of Man, which evoked feelings of elation for Israel's vindication over her enemies, and link it with Isaiah's "suffering servant"⁵ – the coming servant who would suffer for the sins of the nation, be crushed beyond recognition, despised and cast out, and then surprisingly vindicated in a resurrection on the third day.

"Yes," Jesus tells these men, "I am destined for glory, but the 'way' to glory is the terrible way of suffering and death." I wonder how much sorrow Jesus felt in this most intimate of moments as he allowed his friends to share in the fearsome knowledge of his future suffering. Yet, painfully, each time he predicts his passion, his words fall on deaf ears. In the first instance, Peter rebukes him; in the second, the disciples argue about who is the greatest; and now in the third, two disciples make a bizarre request, seeking to exploit the situation for their own personal gain.

II. Jesus Predicts the Destiny of His Disciples (10:35-45)

A. A Request for Greatness (10:35-41)

And James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Him, saying to Him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And He said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant that we may sit in your glory, one on your right, and one on your left."

The two sons of Zebedee, whom Jesus had nicknamed "sons of thunder" (3:17) because of their impulsive bombast and forceful ways, blithely ignore the implications of what he had just said, and make a request: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." They sound like a teenager asking for his father's credit card before he leaves on a trip. But Jesus would not be manipulated to sign a blank check. He asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Grant that we may sit in your glory, one your right and one on your left," they respond. These men are living up to their nicknames. With the memory of the transfiguration still fresh in their minds, and Jerusalem looming on the horizon, they see a window of opportunity to position themselves favorably before the company goes public, as it were. "Let's get in while the stock is low and the competition is limited," is their mindset. Matthew adds the detail that it was their mother who made the request on their behalf (Matt 20:20). And if she was "Jesus' aunt on his mother's side, which is not unlikely" (Carson) it would have applied a little family pressure to the request. Calvin speaks well to the point: "This narrative contains a bright mirror of human vanity; for it shows that proper and holy zeal is often accompanied by ambition."

How painful this request must have been to our Lord! It could not have come at more incongruous mo-

ment. He had just spoken of his impending death and they respond with not a hint of sorrow, seeking to exploit his death for their own advantage. This would be like hearing that your best friend has cancer and, following a quick prayer, you look him in the eye and say, "Can I have your watch?" Yet how often we use the sufferings of our Lord for personal gain rather than shedding tears of repentance.

B. Ignorance of the Way to Greatness

38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

Jesus responds that they have no idea *what* they are asking for or the *way* one achieves it. He asks them if they are capable of drinking his cup⁶ or being baptized with his baptism. The symbol of the cup in the Hebrew Scriptures evokes the terrible image of God's wrath, which was handed to the nations to be drunk dry: "*In the hand of the Lord is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs*" (Ps. 75:8). When drained, this cup of horror and desolation would consume and make one stagger. The thought of drinking it horrified Jesus and crushed his soul. Add to that horror the image of baptism and you can feel yourself drowning in a flood of judgment. As Gundry writes, this "implies that contrary to their expectation they must drink the bitter dregs of suffering and feel a flood of woe overwhelming them if they would hope to share in his later glory."⁷ Are you able to drink this cup?

39 And they said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

As we read their naive response, "we are able," we feel the foreboding fate falling into their laps. What dignity the Lord gives us that he takes us at our word—more than we want at times. Yes, Jesus says, they will drink his cup of woe and be baptized with him in his suffering. How did James and John later reflect on this request when at the moment of Jesus' passion there were two men, one on his right and one on his left, crucified with him? Were they prepared for that humiliation? James was among the first Christian martyrs (Acts 12:2), and John, according to tradition, lived out his final years as a prisoner in Patmos.

Yes, they will drink his cup, but Jesus goes on to say that to sit on his right or left is not his to give; it is for those for whom it has been prepared. This is a clear indication that the sorrows of this life have eternal significance in the age to come, for glory is not a commodity to be handed out, but the end of a long fiery process that purifies the soul. Do you view all your sorrows in this light? Every blow to the heart, every false accusa-

tion, every painful memory of abuse or abandonment is designed to shape you for glory. Nothing is wasted, everything is significant. As Paul says, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17).

41 And hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John.

The remaining ten disciples are indignant, not because they do not share the same ambition, but because James and John made the request first and they feel they might have missed out. The result is ten divided against the two, a faint but powerful echo of Israel of old and its tumultuous civil wars: the ten tribes against the two, from which Israel never recovered. To prevent a repeat of such a terrible schism with the arrival of God’s kingdom, Jesus calls them all to himself to eradicate every trace of zealous pride.

III. Instruction on the Way to Greatness (10:41-44)

And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.

Jesus summons the disciples for a lecture and reminds them of what they well know, the great power and authority of Rome. When the emperor in Rome spoke, entire armies moved throughout the empire. When a law was enacted at the capital, the tax was levied in Galilee. What tremendous power and authority—the few over the many. (Carson⁸ points out that the NIV translation, “lord it over,” gives a false impression. Jesus is not criticizing abuse of power in political structures, but merely contrasting “ruling over” versus “serving under.”) Every Jew understood the extent and weight of Roman authority, but what the disciples did not know was that “it is not so among you.” Greatness in the kingdom is not measured by how many serve you, but by how many you voluntarily serve. This was a radical word in a society where humility was no virtue. And lest we miss the point, Jesus intensifies his statement by adding the word *slave* of all—the most despicable social status in the Roman empire.

In God’s kingdom greatness is not measured by how many you have under your command. Greatness is not measured by how many line up and stand at attention when you present your agenda. No, greatness is based on how many hearts you have willingly won by being a servant to them in their world. And furthermore, the one you encourage them to follow is Christ, not you, so there are no banners in your wake bearing your name.

In light of this, it is fascinating to learn how many slaves came to Christ in those early days and how influential they were in spreading the gospel. Many were

pressed into service in the homes of wealthy and high ranking Roman officials and given the task of educating and shaping the children, the very future of Rome. Numerous slaves took advantage of the opportunity to teach the gospel to these young minds, leading many to Christ, right under the emperor’s nose. In Acts we read how the apostles maintained their influence because they were granted no status by the religious authorities. When they were despised and persecuted they carried out their best work in prison as slaves to the state. What a contrast three hundred years later, when Constantine pronounced Christianity the official religion of the empire and granted it social, political and economic status. This was the death-blow to spirituality and the advent of the decline of Christianity.

How we desperately need this word in a culture where we are taught that influence comes by ascending the competitive ladders, commanding more and more status, positioning ourselves early in the game and relying on networking with such speed that no one listens to a human voice and pain is covered over in a silent grave. This is the spirit that pervades our existence in this valley, but Jesus’ response is adamant: “It is not so among you.”

Henri Nouwen, who died in 1996, was one of the most influential Catholic writers of our day. In 1985 he walked away from his prestigious teaching post at Harvard University and spent a year in the intimate setting of a handicapped community called L’Arche, in France. No one in that community granted the famous author a modicum of prestige for what he had published. In fact, he found that those precious lives became a mirror to his own spiritual condition. Living with the handicapped and learning to love them and weep with them so shaped and renewed his spiritual life that he later accepted the call to their community in Toronto as his permanent home. Henri Nouwen will forever be an icon of one who in his later years became a “servant of all.”⁹

In case the disciples missed the point, Jesus drives it home even further, and with shocking clarity.

IV. The Example of Greatness (10:45)

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Even the Son of Man, the representative Israelite who receives power and dominion to rule an everlasting kingdom, did not come to earth to be served. Jesus was raised in a poor family. He never used his office to his own advantage, never experienced the comforts of wealth or the hospitality of his culture. Every heart he influenced was won by sacrificial love. But his service went even further. This Son of Man became the Suffering Servant who was crushed for our iniquities, scourged for our healing, numbered among the transgressors, and bore the sin of many as a guilt offering (53:12). And the result: “The one dies, the many find their lives ‘ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven’” (D. A.

Carson). Because of that, Jesus has been exalted. He has received power, dominion and glory forever and ever, amen.

V. Can You Drink this Cup?

Do you want to be great? Do you want to have a significant life and influence others? Then you must drink this cup. A glance at church history makes it obvious that this is the only way to greatness. Whenever God raised up a new prophetic voice to carry the gospel into new territory or bring renewal to a dead church it has always been accompanied by suffering, sorrow, and sometimes death. Yet the sweet fragrance of such a life given over to suffering brought about the salvation of the many.

As I reflect on the impact of our many missionaries overseas I am awed by their labors of a love that birthed orphanages and churches in Timor; planted a congregation in the Mafia capital of Italy; established a biblical training center in refugee camps in Ghana; completed a New Testament in far away Capul in the Philippines; gave to the Tarahumara Indians in Mexico a whole new language and way of life in the gospel; started a church in Moldova and made disciples in Romania. Yet anyone who is close to these brothers and sisters knows the deep sorrow they have endured through sickness, poverty, hazards, loneliness, depression, threats and persecution.

Currently I am reading one of most powerful manuscripts of a holy life that I have ever encountered. Several years ago, we commissioned a dear Romanian sister, Ligia Oprean, to translate into English the autobiography of Traian Dorz, the Romanian poet. She has now completed the task and the manuscript will be fully edited in the next few months. However, I could not wait for the final edit, since I've been waiting anxiously over the last ten years to read the story of this man's life. I met Traian Dorz briefly in 1988. He said to me, "You teach about the cross. We live under the cross." Those words have haunted me for ten years. Reading his biography, I now understand the weight of his words.

Traian Dorz was the disciple of Iosif Trifa, a young priest who poured his whole life into reviving his people with the gospel by publishing Christian literature. He labored incessantly and faced cruel persecution until his premature death. Traian took over the work and shortly thereafter was imprisoned in a cruel hell during different intervals totalling seventeen years, from 1948 into the 1980's. Six different times all his property was confiscated. Shortly after his first imprisonment, all his works of poetry, children's books and other writings, twenty years of work, enough to fill an ox cart, were confiscated and burned before his eyes. Over many days in his early imprisonments he was severely beaten. He was forced to live in conditions comparable to Auschwitz.

Yet over the entire duration of this cruel torture, Traian Dorz knew that he was in prison by the hand of God. He knew that his imprisonment was necessary to spread God's word, and he gave thanks to God. The Securitate could take everything from him but his memory. From memory he began recreating the poetry of his immortal songs. At one point he found a broken shard of glass, and each day he covered it with lime dust and etched out a poem, memorizing each one for thirty days at a time. What an amazing spirit this man possessed! His penetrating gaze could look deep into the eyes of his captors and, like Paul, speak to them of the sweetest salvation. At 70 years of age, broken in body, Traian Dorz was thrown into prison one last time, this time into the darkest pit, filled with gypsy murderers and vile creatures. He said it was like living with the devil himself. Yet he felt that God had sent him there for their salvation. He wrote:

the only way to prove my faith to them and to make a way toward their hearts was to give them the little provision I had: my clothes, my food, my medicines. It was only after seeing this behavior day by day for three months, that they began getting closer to me and listened a little about God...There is no better way to get close to people in order to bring them to God, than the way of sacrificial love. There is a way, if you stay hungry and give them your food; if you can shiver and give them your clothing; if you can endure pain and give them your medicine; if you can remain dirty and give them your soap; if only you can...

Traian Dorz did, and four of those condemned gypsies came to Christ.

Meditating over each page of this manuscript has given me a better vision of Christ who endured such hostility for my sake, and who says to me and to you, "Will you drink this cup?"

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1. The word "way" occurs in Mark at 8:27 and at 10:53, forming an inclusio indicating the theme of this section.
2. "what was going to happen to Him": the verb "happen" was sometimes used in reference to death and is found in the last will and testament of Aristotle (Diog. L. 5,11;12). There is also a word-play in the text with "going up...to go together [i.e. to happen]...we are going up," which emphasizes that the "way" of Jesus shall without a doubt also be the way of the disciples.
3. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 570.
4. See 1 *Enoch* 45:3-4; 46:4-5; 48:1-49:4; 61:8-9; 62:1-9; 63:11.
5. Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-13; 50:4-10; 52:13-53:12.
6. On the "cup" see Isa 51:17, 22; Jer 25:15,17,28; Ezek 23:31; Zech 12:2.
7. Gundry, 577.
8. D.A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 432.
9. Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*, (New York: Doubleday, 1988) tells the story of that year.



THE GREATEST SIGHT OF ALL

Catalog No. 1131
 Mark 10:46-52
 30th Message
 Brian Morgan
 October 10th, 1999

I. Reflective Images of the Blind Isaiah 40-55

In our last study in the gospel of Mark we saw that for a third time, Jesus poured out his soul to his disciples, telling them in explicit terms what awaited him in Jerusalem. Diligently and with painstaking detail he instructed them that the “way” of the Son of Man and the glory attributed to him (Dan 7:13,14) would come about only through the “way” of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant.¹ In order for this Servant to be crowned king and achieve victory over his enemies he would have to endure betrayal, condemnation, suffering and death. Jesus added that his “way” would be the disciples’ “way” also. As the twelve leaders of the new Israel they would follow in the footsteps of their Master. But, once again, Jesus’ pronouncement fell on deaf ears. The disciples were quick to seize upon the glory of the Son of Man, but blind to the “way” to that glory.

Mark’s story would end as a tragic repeat of Israel’s story were it not for the fact that during Israel’s exile, God in his tenacious love committed himself to restore his people and enact new levels of grace. He promised to do what had never been done before: He would cause the blind to see, and on a massive scale. This is beautifully depicted in Isaiah 40-55.² In those chapters the prophet described Israel as blind and deaf, for “they have seen many things, but do not observe them” (Isa 42:18,19). But days were coming when God would send his people a “servant” who would open the eyes of the blind and lead them in a new “way”:

“I will appoint you as a covenant to the people,
 As a light to the nations,
To open blind eyes,
 To bring out prisoners from the dungeon,
 And those who dwell in darkness from the prison”
 (Isa 42:6b-7).

And as a result...

“And I will lead the **blind** by a **way** they do not know,
 In paths they do not know I will guide them” (Isa 42:16).

Jesus claimed to be this servant who would open Israel’s eyes to see that the “way” of Yahweh’s redemptive wisdom is expressed in Christ crucified (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25).³

Against this background now Mark includes one final incident before Jesus and the disciples depart for Jerusalem. As they leave Jericho, the author records an

encounter with a blind beggar.

II. The Son of Timaeus and the Son of David Mark 10:46-52

And they came to Jericho. And as He was going out from Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude, the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar was sitting beside the road [lit. ‘the way.’] And when he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!” And many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take courage, arise! He is calling for you.” And casting aside his cloak, he jumped up, and came to Jesus. And answering him, Jesus said, “What do you want Me to do for you?” And the blind man said to Him, “Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!” And Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he regained his sight and began following Him on the road [lit. ‘in the way.’]

This incident occurs close to Jericho,⁴ the place where, centuries earlier, Rahab, the harlot, became a glowing example of one saved by faith in the God of Israel. Rahab felt no shame in publicly identifying with Israel. In New Testament times there were two Jerichos, one old and one new. “In Jesus’ time the old Jericho was largely abandoned, but the new one extending to the south was an attractive city. It had been built by Herod the Great who had his winter palace there.”⁵ As Jesus is leaving the old and approaching the new, a blind beggar hears that he is coming, surrounded by a large crowd of pilgrims. Bartimaeus is Aramaic for “son of Timaeus.” Gundry notes that, unlike his usual practice of placing the Aramaic expression first and then translating it, Mark puts the translation, “son of Timaeus” first to prepare us for what follows in the cry, “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me.”⁶

The beggar’s piercing cry is an embarrassment to the crowd. They attempt to silence him, but to no avail. The more they tell him to be quiet, the louder he cries. Upon hearing him, Jesus, to everyone’s amazement, halts the procession and calls for the man. Encouraged by the crowd to go forward, Bartimaeus immediately jumps up, throws his cloak aside and comes to Jesus. Jesus asks him, “What do you want me to do for you?” With-

out hesitating the man replies, “Rabboni, I want to regain my sight.” With but a word from Jesus the man is fully healed and sent on his way. Our text, which began with the man blind and begging alongside “the way,” ends with him seeing, no longer begging, following Jesus “in the way.”

III. A Mirror for the Disciples

Reflecting on this text against the background of Isaiah we see that this incident was designed by God as a mirror to help the disciples understand their own blindness and fan the flame of their faith. O, the amazing grace of God! If the disciples fail to understand what Jesus has taught them “in the ear,” then God will complement that teaching with something they can “see,” until what they have heard in their ear resonates in the mirror of what they “see” with the eye, and a miracle of “insight” occurs in their hearts. This is still a common method for how God teaches us. First he speaks to us directly in the “ear” through the teaching of his word. Oftentimes, of course, we don’t “get it,” because we sleep through the sermon! When that occurs, God designs visual aids for our daily lives, events which are orchestrated to act as divine mirrors to resonate with what he has taught us in the “ear.” How often God interrupts my zealous pursuing of some “pilgrimage” and inserts a seemingly “insignificant” individual to stop me in my tracks! Later I learn that such an occurrence was no interruption, but a mirror through which I saw the face of God.

This is what happened in this incident near Jericho, on the road to Jerusalem. The cry of this blind beggar halts the entire procession and all eyes are focused on him. The dusty road becomes a holy stage of revelation to the disciples. They will see three images reflected in this mirror that is held up before them.

A. A Mirror of Blindness

First, the blind Bartimaeus was a mirror of their blindness. Mark writes that Bartimaeus is “alongside the ‘way’” but not yet “in the ‘way’”. The beggar confesses that Jesus is the Son of David (Messiah), but the man is still blind, groping in the dark. So too are the disciples. Although they have confessed Jesus as Messiah, their sight is only partial. When it comes to understanding the way of the Messiah, they are still groping in the dark. So Bartimaeus is a mirror of their blindness.

B. A Mirror of Faith

Bartimaeus also mirrors faith which breaks through the blindness. Mark gives three characteristics of this faith. First, it is desperate. Bartimaeus cries for mercy. His cry is not drawn out; neither is it rehearsed or repetitive. It is an appeal sprung from helplessness, coming from the depth of his heart. That condition of helplessness gives his cry such intensity: “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Second, it is relentless. Bartimaeus is oblivious to any obstacles. Many in the crowd, however, are embar-

assed by his outburst and harshly rebuke him. I wonder if their rebuke reminded the disciples of Jesus’ earlier rebuke, “permit the little ones to come to be and stop hindering them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (10:14). Here is a “little one” coming to Jesus, being hindered by the crowd. But Bartimaeus will not be deterred by embarrassment or protocol; his need is too great. The more they rebuke him, the louder his cry becomes. He knew that this window of opportunity would not be open forever. The time to act was now. His was a desperate, relentless faith.

And third, his faith is reckless. Hearing the good news that Jesus is nearby, he immediately casts aside his cloak to make his way to the Son of David. This outer cloak, probably his sole possession, served as a bedroll or blanket by night and a cushion for begging by day. But he is so overcome with emotion at the possibility of regaining his sight, and seeing Jesus, that its value is diminished to a throwaway. What a contrast to the rich young ruler! When he was challenged to sell all that he had and follow Jesus, he went away grieved, because he owned much property (10:22). Genuine faith casts everything away for the new life. What a testimony this desperate, relentless, reckless faith must have been to the twelve!

C. A Mirror of Mercy

The third image the disciples see in this mirror is that of mercy reflected in the response of Jesus. Notice, first, that when someone makes a cry from the heart, like this blind man, Jesus hears. Despite all the obstacles, and the embarrassment of the crowd, this man’s cry gets through. Jesus hears, stops the procession, and immediately says, “Call him.”

Secondly, once Jesus hears, he takes over and every obstacle now comes under his authority to serve his purposes. The crowd, who once rebuked the beggar, ordering him to be quiet, now encourages him with the verb, “take courage.” This verb, found elsewhere in the New Testament, comes only from the lips of Jesus. ⁷ It may have been a favorite expression of his because it evoked the well known prophecy of Zephaniah 3, found in the Greek translation (the Septuagint: LXX) of Zephaniah 3:

“Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away His judgments against you,
he has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
You will fear disaster no more.
In that day it will be said to Jerusalem:
‘Do not be afraid (i.e. ‘take courage’ – *tharsei*), O
Zion:
Do not let your hands fall limp.
The Lord your God is in your midst,
A warrior who saves” (Zeph 3:14-17a).

Now the wondrous greeting expressed by Jesus so many times comes from the voices of the crowd, demonstrating that they, who once opposed the blind man, have now become agents to bring him to Jesus. What a reversal! From “be quiet,” to “take courage, arise!” Hearing those words we are tempted to add, “The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who saves (Yeshuah).”

The third thing to notice is that Jesus prompts Bartimaeus with the question, “What do you want me to do for you?” James and John must have been taken aback upon hearing this stinging echo of their previous request (10:35), which Jesus denied. But the blank check he had denied them he now offers to the blind man. The difference is, they had asked for glory but were blind to the “way” of glory. This one asks only to see. If that is what you are hungering for, to see Jesus and him crucified, he will give you a blank check. When Jesus sees genuine faith for the right things, so eager is he to grant our request he prompts us to ask.

Several months ago when I was sick and unusually depressed, God sent me a mirror of faith in the beautiful prayer of a dying woman. I wrote the following in my prayer journal that week:

Sick I lay this week
at times felt old and outdated
inadequate to write or communicate
robbed of any larger purpose
to pull or quake
unfeeling silence –
finally antibiotics kicked in
and the body begins to feel
perhaps the soul will revive soon
I speak with a dying lady
in the hospital
I feel tears again
and in the sweet savor
of her confession and longings
I see you
in the mystery of weakness –

Hospital visits often do that for me as oftentimes I am rebuked by the requests and holy confessions of the sick and dying. Such was the effect of the blind man’s request to the disciples.

The fourth thing to notice is that this man’s faith grants him more than he asked for. He asked only to “see,” but Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well (lit. “saved you)”. This term, which is pregnant with meaning, is taken from of Isaiah 35:4, where the prophet speaks of that great day when Yahweh himself would come to restore Zion; therefore...

“Say to those with anxious heart,
“Take courage, fear not.
Behold, your God will come with vengeance;
The recompense of God will come,
But He will save you.’
Then the eyes of the blind will be opened...”

(Isa 35:2b-5a).

What a day this was for Bartimaeus! Now that he sees, immediately, without hesitating, he follows Jesus in “the way.” With his new vision he not only recognizes Jesus as Son of David (Messiah), he is pictured as following Jesus in the “way.” What a creative miracle which causes us to see Christ and him crucified and makes us willing to walk in that “way.” This is how the apostle Paul described his own conversion : “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). Earlier he had written the Corinthians, “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

This then was the glorious mirror which God orchestrated for the twelve: a mirror of their own blindness, a mirror of saving faith, a mirror of the precious mercy of Jesus. Jesus is the one who hears our cry, gives us immediate access, and grants us more than we ever dreamed, including a willing obedience to follow his “way.”

IV. Do You Want to See Jesus?

Have we stopped to thank God for these mirrors he so carefully places in our lives? They are designed so that we see ourselves, fan our faith so that we see Jesus and long to share in the fellowship of his sufferings. A few weeks ago, I received just such a mirror in a letter from a young Romanian girl. Adriana had recently returned from teaching at a children’s camp. Before leaving for the camp she was experiencing a dark time in her soul. She wrote: “I’m in the middle of the most beautiful birthday of my life. It took a dark night of my soul to notice the stars. Without it I would have never had the epiphany of Yahweh. One night in the camp I saw Yahweh’s face.” The Holy Spirit came over this camp of elementary-age children and impressed upon their young souls the depth of Christ’s suffering on their behalf. The letter continues: “On July 6, thirty-seven children came to Christ. Some of them were crying in my arms, but I was so ashamed because I could see the difference between them and us, the grown-ups. We do not cry so much for our sins. I wish you saw Aluna (age 9) with her face all tears. I wish you heard one of them asking for forgiveness for the mask he wore and imploring God for a new and real face. When they went to bed I turned on the grass where they prayed and, looking at their faces, printed in my heart I saw the face of God and wrote this poem:

Their prayers still float
in the grass, in the dew, in the air.
The flight of pure wings
is touching my new face.
And I wonder:
have I been living all my life
just to taste this one minute
that has just passed away?

I am not worthy
to stay with your little ones today,
I do not dare to kiss the grass
on which their feet walked,
which swallowed their tears
and in which their prayers
are still breathing.
Lord, it is too much
too much for my soul
unworthy am I
to look at them.”

—Adriana Negoï

Adriana saw and understood that these little children were to be a mirror to her. But what she could not foresee was that her letter would become a mirror to me. I have wept often in life, over the loss of children, the loss of friends, or in the presence of sacred love, but I am ashamed to say I have never wept over my sins and the suffering I caused Christ, as these little children did. My prayer is that God may grant me the grace he gave to Bartimaeus: to see Jesus and him crucified on my behalf. Then the words of the prophet shall ring true in my heart,

“And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born” (Zech 12:10).

Amen.

1. The Servant Songs are found in Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-13; 50:4-10; and 52:13-53:12.

2. I am indebted to the fine work of Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 243-257, for these thoughts.

3. Watts, 252.

4. D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 435, notes that “Matthew and Mark say that Jesus was ‘leaving’ and Luke that he was ‘entering’ Jericho...many avoid the geographical contradiction by noting that in this period there were two Jerichos—an older town on the hill, largely in ruins, and the new Herodian town about one mile away (cf. Jos. War IV, 459 [viii. 3]). In this view Matthew and Mark, under Jewish influence, mention the old town Jesus was leaving; Luke the Hellenist refers to the new one, which Jesus is entering.”

5. Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 721.

6. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 593.

7. “Cheer up!” is *tharsei*. It occurs only seven times in the NT (Matt 9:2, 22; 14:27; Mark 6:50; 10:49; John 16:33; Acts 23:11), and six of the seven are from the lips of Jesus. The exception is here.” Wessel, 722.

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JERUSALEM, MEET YOUR KING!

Catalog No. 1132

Mark 11:1-11

31st Message

Brian Morgan

October 17th, 1999

Up to this point in the gospel of Mark everything has been building to the dramatic climax to which we now come, the presentation of the Messiah in Jerusalem, the city of the great King. This is the moment that has been anticipated for centuries, ever since David left the city in shame and ignominy. Following David's spiritual restoration in the wilderness, his return to Jerusalem (2 Sam 19) was anticlimactic and unsatisfying. He was welcomed home by a cripple, to a strife-plagued city. The glory of his kingdom would never be seen again. Following the reign of Solomon and centuries of civil war, Israel lived in exile, beset by a constant ache for a righteous king who would restore the nation to her former glory. This ache and anticipation was fueled by the prophets who with one voice insisted the day would come when...

"I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land" (Jer 23:5); and, "My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees" (Ezek 37:24); and, "afterward the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to his blessings in the last days." (Hos 3:5)

Fueled by these promises, pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem three times a year for the great feasts would sing verses from the *Hallel* (praise) psalms (113-118) in unison,

*"O Lord, do save (hosanna!), we beseech Thee;
O Lord, we beseech Thee, do send prosperity!*

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." (Ps 118:25, 26a)

This is a time of great emotion now as the Lord approaches the Mount of Olives and the city comes into view. At last, the long awaited coronation of Israel's king upon the vacant throne of David is at hand. Our text primarily concerns worship. It is therefore extremely important, since it is my view that true worship is what makes us most fully human. In this text then we will learn how to give Jesus, our King, the true acclamation he deserves.

As we come to the text, I want to point out two things by way of introduction regarding the writer's structure and style. First, as to style, Cranfield notes that in this account, Mark "combines vividness of detail with the most notable restraint regarding messianic color (con-

trast with both Mt 21:9 and Lk 19:38)."¹ While the subtle but vivid nature of these allusions can easily be missed by the casual reader, they are all the more powerful to the one who possesses faith and a sensitive, "seeing" eye. We must read this text in a spirit of humble faith to catch its significance. A casual reading will not avail us much.

Secondly, as to its structure, we will observe that the text has three movements: the preparations for the king; the procession of the king; and the arrival of the king. Surprisingly, each section is dramatically shorter than the previous one, with less than half the number of verses. Mark gives far more space to the preparations for the journey than the actual journey (which covered about two miles), and even less to the climactic moment of the king's arrival in the city. This makes for an anticlimactic and rather poignant ending. It raises the question of whether we should entitle this text, as many do, "*The Triumphal Entry.*"

I. The Preparation for the King (11:1-7)

And as they approached Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, He sent two of His disciples, and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. And if anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' you say, 'The Lord has need of it'; and immediately he will send it back here." And they went away and found a colt tied at the door outside in the street; and they untied it. And some of the bystanders were saying to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" And they spoke to them just as Jesus had told them, and they gave them permission. And they brought the colt to Jesus and put their garments on it; and He sat upon it.

In our last study we left our Lord and his disciples just outside Jericho. From there they hiked up on the Roman military road which was "about seventeen miles long and climbed three thousand feet. It passed through Bethany and nearby Bethphage ("*house of unripe figs*"), which lay on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives, then crossed over the mount and the Kidron Valley and entered Jerusalem. The mounts stands about three hundred feet higher than the temple hill...affording a spectacular, panoramic view of the city."²

I caught my first view of Jerusalem from this spot. It was early in the morning and the city was awash in the light of dawn, a fiery splendor that took my breath away. Bargil Pixner describes the view:

Much as today, it was a fascinating sight at that time: On the eastern hill of Jerusalem, the city wall with the Golden Gate arose and behind it the wide Temple compound with the Temple at its center and the surrounding walls and builds, beautifully reconstructed and enlarged by Herod. To the back of it, above the Tyropoeon Valley, the ancient palace of the Hasmoneans, which now served as the Praetorium, was visible; and far in the distance, Herod's Upper Palace with its three enormous towers. The Second Wall north of the city partly hid the public garden, where, in a quarry area, a hill had remained, called Golgotha."³

Mark records that as they approached Jerusalem they came to a fork in the road, "the left fork leading to Bethany and a side road, the right fork leading past Bethphage on the main, Roman road to Jerusalem."⁴ At this juncture Jesus sends two of his disciples on a mission: He has need of a royal mount. His choice is extraordinary: He wants a young colt on which no man has ever sat—a most unusual way to make a royal entrance. Having already made the arrangements, he gives his two disciples explicit instructions where to find the colt, what they are to do with it and what to say if someone objects.

Immediately they are off, and they find everything just as Jesus had said. By a door, outside on the street, an unbroken colt stands, secured by a rope. They untie it, and when several bystanders question them as to what they are doing, they give the appropriate answer, "The Lord has need of it." Rikk Watts observes, "Impressment, while permitted for others, was very much a 'royal prerogative.'"⁶ With permission granted, they return with the colt, and place their garments on it to make a saddle for their king.

Everything is now ready for his royal entrance. They proceed over the top of the summit, in full view of Jerusalem.

II. The Procession of the King (11:8-10)

And many spread their garments in the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields. And those who went before, and those who followed after, were crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David; Hosanna in the highest!"

Once the king has his royal mount, which he ordered and prepared, Mark records the unrestrained response of the crowd. Immediately upon seeing Jesus riding the colt they begin making a "royal" processional highway, using their garments, together with leafy branches and straw gathered from the fields. When Jehu was anoint-

ed king, "each man took his garment and placed it under him on the bare steps" (2 Kgs 9:12,13). But Jehu's royal highway covered only the steps up to the building. This is what authorities do today when they lay out a red carpet for dignitaries, right up to the airplane ramp. But this royal highway covered two miles! Imagine the sight: here is the king, humbly mounted on the foal of a donkey, surrounded by the feverish work of all to make sure his royal coach never touches the ground, traversing over two miles of colorful garments, straw and leaves. It seemed as if all the creation was coming together to greet him.

On this spontaneously constructed two-mile royal highway an unrehearsed choir now raise their voices to the heavens (cf. 1 Kgs 1:38-40). Their singing has a spatial fullness about it, for it surrounds the king front and rear. And it has a timeless depth, drawing sacred texts out of Israel's ancient past, the Psalms, and singing them with fresh vigor in the fulfillment of the present. The verses come from the great Hallel (*Praise*) Psalms 113-118, which were sung by the pilgrims as shouts of acclamation and praise in preparation for their feast days. Here they combine "*Hosanna*" (Ps 118:25a), Aramaic for "*save now*," and a close derivative of the original Aramaic and Hebrew name for Jesus ("Yehoshuah," cf. 2 Sam 14:4; 2 Kgs 6:26), with Psalm 118:26a, "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*." The result is that the ancient blessing of the pilgrims now takes on richer and fuller meaning in the present. And finally, there is a heavenly dimension to their worship, for when they cry, "Hosanna in the highest," they expect their singing to resonate all the way to heaven, to be answered with an angelic echo of affirmation and acclamation. This is why much of the singing of the early church was done antiphonally, one group answering the other to give the effect of a choir of angels echoing the praise of our worship on earth.

This is the purpose of singing in our worship services. Our music should be designed to transport us to a much larger world of time and space, integrating heaven and earth, where past, present and future all kiss in a moment in time, everything being done in the midst of common settings, with the risen Christ divinely present. When that happens, as a gift of his grace we are overcome with awe and wonder.

Here then is our king on his royal mount, riding down the highway of holiness, surrounded by spontaneous worship that is large, full voiced and extravagant. There is more joy and shouts of acclamation in this text than when David first brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem (2 Sam 6). All this prepares us for the climactic reception in the city of the great king. How will Jerusalem, the joy of the whole earth, react when she sees her king?

III. The Reception for the King (11:11)

And He entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking all around, He departed for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late.

It is probable that Jesus entered Jerusalem through “what some call now Saint Stephen’s gate, near the north entrance to the outer court of the temple.”⁷ But, incredibly, no one was there to meet him. Have you ever arrived at foreign airport and found no one there to meet you? Thankfully, such an experience is usual. Now imagine a ruler entering the capital city of his own people for his coronation and no one in the administration turns out to meet him. Mark does not prepare us for this emotional letdown, unlike Matthew, who records that Jesus wept when he saw the city, knowing she had missed the day of her visitation. But Mark keeps it a secret, suspending our emotions for one of the greatest letdowns ever.

When dignitaries entered Jerusalem in ancient times, especially after having won a great victory, there would be ceremony—“greetings, acclamations, and invocations of God”—the high point of which would be “a visit to the Temple” with “some sort of cultic activity.”⁸ But when Jesus entered the city, no one in an official capacity came to greet him, embrace him or offer him hospitality—not one priest, not one scribe or Pharisee, not one representative from the Sanhedrin. Strangely, this was no different from what occurred at his birth. This was a painful echo of David’s experience, when his joy in bringing the ark of the covenant into the city was met by the acclamation of all—that is, until he got home. It was there, where he expected to be appreciated by the one closest to him, that he received a massive insult that drowned his joy (2 Sam 6:20). And so the same fate befalls the greater Son of David.

The silence is like a slap in the face to Jesus. Now, enveloped in an eerie quiet, he casts his penetrating gaze around the temple. From out of the deafening silence we can almost hear Malachi’s haunting words, “‘And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?’” (Mal 3:1,2)

Jesus, alone now except for the twelve, leaves the city for the safer soil of Bethany. It was quite late, and Jerusalem proved not only inhospitable but dangerous. He retreats to Bethany, the place from where he got the colt, the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

IV. O Worship the King!

From this processional drama we learn how Jesus is to be worshipped. This is the most important lesson in life, for when we truly worship we are most fully human. How then should we give the acclamation that is due our King? I will close with four observations.

A. The Primacy of Humility

First, it is highly significant that most of the verses in our text deal with the preparations for the king’s coronation. Notice that the disciples who make the preparations do so under rigid and explicit instructions from

the Lord. Everything has been arranged, agreed to and secured in advance. All else in the text is spontaneous and unplanned, except for one thing, which Jesus will not relinquish control or leave to chance. What is that one thing? It is “*the manner*” in which the Lord is presented to his people. Yes, he is the new Son of David, ready to restore David’s kingdom, but he is going to do so in a manner quite unlike David. His Messianic claims to be the Son of David are to be understood in a new way, the way of Zechariah, who said,

**“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
He is just and endowed with salvation,
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,
Even a colt, the foal of a donkey.”** (Zech 9:9)

Humility is to be the great hallmark of the Jesus “way.” And, as Rawlinson points out, “every confrontation in Jerusalem with them (*the Jews*) will come down to this, will it be their way or his way.”⁹ The only time in the gospels when Jesus gives a description of himself is when he says that he is “*gentle and humble of heart*” (Matt 11:29). This means that there is never to be a hint of coercion in his rule over the hearts of men. He is to be presented in humility as the one who dies for others. This explains why Jesus used two disciples to secure the colt—so that they would learn the lesson well. It is the job of disciples to present Jesus to the world in this manner, mounted not on a stallion but on a colt, humbly dragging his feet in the dust of the streets as he enters Jerusalem.

This is why the apostle Paul instructed Timothy as a elder to put on “gentleness” even when correcting a vile false teacher, knowing that it was this one quality that might free the person from the grip of the devil (2 Tim 2:24ff). Not brilliance or dogmatism, but gentleness. If the church had understood this there would have been no need for the Crusades or the Inquisition or the evils that still plague us.

So when we place our Lord before the world we must always put him on the humble mount of the colt of a donkey, not in limousine of wealth, not with the trappings of status or power. So our first concern in giving our Lord his due is presenting him to the world with a face of humility.

B. The Beauty of Anonymity

The second thing to notice about this text is that, unlike the rest of Mark’s gospel, everyone is nameless except the king. At other times when disciples are sent on a mission they are named, but here they are nameless. So also are the bystanders, the owner of the colt, the crowd, and those in the temple. The only name we hear in this royal procession is Jesus, and the titles of acclamation, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” Isn’t that how it should be? As the Lord is crowned king, all his servants fade into the background.

We are not worthy to have any attention drawn to ourselves. Everything is focused upon him. This is one of the most beautiful things about true worship. When we give true acclamation to the king we have no need to be known and stand out. It is far more fulfilling to have him at the center (Rev 4,5). This is the beauty of anonymity.

So we have the primacy of humility and the beauty of anonymity; and third, the glory of spontaneity.

C. The Glory of Spontaneity

Once Jesus is given his proper place on a throne of humility and his servants fade into the background, all of creation breaks out into spontaneous worship and heavenly acclaim. It is then that the highway of holiness which the prophets predicted is made, not by the pleas or plans of men, but by the sight of Jesus crowned in humility. It is that wondrous sight that moves the tender hearts of those around to sing like angels and cast forth their garments like the rush of the wind. Perhaps our world does not worship and give homage to Jesus as we would like, not because we have lacked strategies or apologetics, but because we haven't presented Jesus in his rightful place, on his throne of humility, and then taken ourselves out of the way.

Last week, a number of brothers experienced this very thing at a men's retreat. One of the men revealed that he had come to the realization that Jesus was Lord just that very morning, so the next day we scheduled a public baptism, at Lover's Point, the most central spot in Pacific Grove. Then another brother spontaneously expressed his desire to profess his commitment to Christ. After a time of public singing, teaching and sharing, we plunged our two brothers into the raging sea as a symbol of their wedding vows to Christ. Here were these two nameless figures taking on the most humiliating image, plunged into a watery grave. To our surprise, spontaneous cheers and applause broke out among onlookers on the sea wall. Several of them came to talk to us, and in the aftermath one of the brothers wrote a song entitled "Holy Ground" to commemorate the event. This was a wonderful time of worship in the glory of spontaneity.

D. The Poignant Silence

Finally, we discover that in the midst of great acclamation in worship there is also great pain. Those for whom the entire procession was meant failed to attend or even send their regrets. A pain of silence slaps Jesus in the face. Later, according to Matthew, he would say,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Matt 23:37-39)

Jesus came but once to this city to be coronated. What she did with him determined her destiny: her house was left desolate. Yet in loyal love, he keeps reaching out, offering repentance. But repentance means they must go back to that place where they rejected him and accept the way he came, in humility, and start anew from that point. It is this last quality that makes us most human. In my own worship I find that during my times of greatest intimacy with the Lord there is a strange mixture of "love and sorrow mingling down." And it comes for the same reason. Often those whom we care for most, those closest to us, are far away, and true worship embraces that sorrow. Yet if we follow in the Jesus way we never give up. In humility we keep the invitation open.

This is the true worship that glorifies the King.

1. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 347.
2. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 437
3. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus in Jerusalem, his first and last days in Judea* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin, 1996) 64.
4. Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 624.
5. The issue of "a colt no man has ever sat" is not due to it being 'unbroken,' it is an issue of 'holiness', something set apart to God. Jesus is born in a womb no man has ever touched; he rides a mule no man has ever sat; and is laid in a tomb no man has ever been laid (cf. Num 19:2; Deut 21:3; 1 Sam 6:7; 2 Sam 6:3; Zech 9:9; Luke 23:53).
6. Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 306. Watts also notes the messianically interpreted oracle of Genesis 49:10-12 regarding the colt.
7. Carson, 440.
8. Watts, 305.
9. A.E.J. Rawlinson, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Methuen, 1949) 151.

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CURSING TREES AND MOVING MOUNTAINS

Catalog No. 1133

Mark 11:12-26

32nd Message

Brian Morgan

October 24th, 1999

Has there ever been an occasion when in the face of evil you felt the urge to march in General George Patton style and forcefully take over and set everything right? Are such actions ever appropriate for Christians? We have reached chapter 11 of Mark's gospel, the account of our Lord's climactic entrance into Jerusalem. Israel's long awaited king is set to restore the kingdom of David. To the great surprise of the disciples, however, Jesus presents himself not in the way of David but of Zechariah, mounted on a donkey, even the foal of a donkey (Zech 9:9). Israel's king arrives for his coronation in a spirit of humility and gentleness. This makes us all the more ill prepared for what happens the next day when, in an exhibition of violent and ferocious authority, he curses a fig tree and cleanses the temple. So much for attempting to place Jesus in a box. In our text today we will learn that there is much mystery surrounding spirituality and many tensions that we need to hold in balance. It takes maturity to wrestle with these tensions, giving full weight to each, yet not comprising one with another. Here we will learn when it is our rare right as Christians to exercise forceful control over an evil situation.

Our text has three movements. In the first (11:12-14), Jesus stops to examine a fig tree on his way to the city. Observing that the tree has no fruit, he delivers a shocking curse. In the second movement (11:15-19), Jesus takes the temple by storm and prohibits all commercial traffic in and about Israel's spiritual center. Like Jeremiah the prophet he delivers a stinging sermon in that arena of rare quiet. Finally, in the third movement, as he is returning to Bethany (11:20-26), the disciples ask him about the fig tree he had cursed earlier in the day. These three texts are interconnected and must be held tightly together in their context to interpret their meaning. The implications of this day will give the disciples the key to unleashing heavenly forces that are able to remove insurmountable obstacles to the kingdom of God on earth.

I. Cursing the Fig Tree (11:12-14)

And on the next day, when they had departed from Bethany, He became hungry. And seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And He answered and said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you forever!" And His disciples were listening.

Departing Bethany for Jerusalem, Jesus is overcome with hunger. From some distance he observes a fig tree well endowed with leaves. Hoping to find some fruit to eat, he makes his way to the tree. He was not expecting to find mature fruit on it because, as Mark says, "it was not the season for figs." Gundry further explains: "not even

for the early figs that grow on the old wood of the tree and ripen in June, much less for the summer figs that grow on the new wood and ripen August-October. Jesus could hope to find only buds which form just before and as the tree leafs...At maturity early figs are 'very good' (Jer 24:2,3, 5), but buds are of marginal edibility." That was what Jesus was looking for, small but edible buds that were a sign of future fruit. But he finds nothing, no buds, only leaves: 'No buds now? Well then, no fruit in June - or ever afterwards.'"¹

Jesus responds by delivering a curse that explodes with so many negatives it awakens the ears of the disciples: "*May no one no longer eat fruit from you forever!*" To this, Mark adds the comment, "*And His disciples were listening.*" For the first time in the gospel the disciples appear spiritually sensitive. On this occasion, unlike so many others, they were actually listening. Jesus' explosive curse, following his "gentle" demeanor of the previous day,² must have jarred their senses. This event takes root in their hearts as they pass Bethphage ("*the house of unripe figs*") and journey down the Kidron valley, past Gethsemane, to Jerusalem.

II. Cleansing the Court of the Gentiles (12:15-19)

A. Forceful, Authoritative Actions (11:15-16)

And they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to cast out those who were selling and buying in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple.

Jesus and his disciples arrive in the temple, in the area known as the court of the gentiles, the one place specifically designated for worship by God-fearing gentiles. Looking forward to the Messianic era, the prophet Isaiah envisioned a time when foreigners would come in droves to this outer court and God would do a new thing among them:

"Also the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, To minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, To be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath, And holds fast My covenant; Even those I will bring to My holy mountain, And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." (Isa 56:6,7)

Isaiah foresaw a time when this outer court of the gentiles would become as holy as the inner court of the Jews. Rikk Watts observes: "the time is at hand when even Gentiles can belong to the 'kingdom of priests'."³ But Jesus

finds this outer court overrun with commercialism, traffic and noise. The commerce, which seemed innocent enough, was designed to be a help, not a hindrance, to the pilgrims and their worship. Gundry writes:

The sellers sell sacrificial animals guaranteed to be clean to pilgrims who live too far away to bring their own and to locals who do not want to risk having their own animals declared unclean by priestly inspectors. The moneychangers give acceptable Tyrian currency for other currencies in order that worshipers may pay the temple tax and buy sacrificial animals (m. Seqal. 1:3, 47-8; 5:3-5 *et passim*). Doves are sold to worshipers who cannot afford animals (Lev 1:14; 5:7, 11; 12:6, 8).⁴

But the location where these entrepreneurs chose to set up shop was the only place gentiles had to worship. What might have seemed innocent commerce for the convenience of worshipers turned out to be big business. Worshipers had to exchange their “unclean” Roman money for Kosher funds (“the Tyrian currency was the closest thing to the old Hebrew shekel” [Wessel]), and moneychangers charged exorbitant fees for these transactions. Profit had taken precedence over worship. Added to all this was the sight of people laden with commercial items, using the temple mount as a short-cut from the Mount Olives to the city. The court of the gentiles which was meant to be a house of prayer for all peoples had become a busy commercial intersection—a noisy shopping mall.

Jesus is consumed with rage at the sight. Without warning he takes complete control over the situation with “a ferocious exercise of authority and power” (Gundry). What a shock this must have been to the disciples! In contrast to his gentle and humble demeanor the day before, riding on a colt into the city in a display of pure passivity, now Jesus is physically and forcefully taking control of everything around him. He begins by throwing out all the sellers and buyers within the precincts of the temple; then he overturns the money tables and the chairs of the dove traders. As the money scatters about, the furniture totters and overturns and the bemused merchants flee, Jesus creates a holy barrier to all who treated the sacred court as a short-cut to their destinations. He has cleansed the court of the gentiles of every vestige of commercialism, noise and traffic, restoring it to a quiet place of sacred worship.

The contrast between the Jews’ attitude towards the gentile court and the attitude of Jesus could not be sharper. The Jews viewed the court as inconsequential, merely an appropriate place to set up shop or to be traversed for convenience, but Jesus regards it as unique holy ground not to be violated. That is why he restores it, using violent authority, to its rightful purpose, and in view of the greater salvation which was about to dawn.

When is it proper to become angry and exercise force as a Christian? It is when foreigners, guests and God-fearers come to worship and in that vulnerable state instead of finding a safe place to pray they are taken advantage of financially or ignored. That is when Christians are free to throw the offering plates in the air! If we took this seriously I wonder how we would respond to what goes on in some modern-day churches.

Jesus’ actions had tremendous implications for his messianic claims, for in the Old Testament, temple cleansing was the sole prerogative of the king. Here Jesus seizes that role as if it were his by divine right. His action was a slap

in the face to the existing high priest, since all this commercial activity was taking place under his authorization. If Jesus’ actions were not insulting enough, he takes on the role of a prophet, preaching in the manner of Jeremiah. John Calvin said: “He declared Himself to be both King and High Priest, who presided over the Temple and the worship of God.”⁵ This claim would be blasphemous were it not true.

B. Forceful, Authoritative Teaching (11:17)

And He began to teach and say to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a robbers’ den.”

Jesus’ words, quoted from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, are nothing new, but he applies them with fresh force on this occasion. God had designed the temple to be a house of prayer for all nations but, as in the days of Jeremiah, the Jewish leadership had made it a haven for robbers. Rikki Watts fills in the background:

The expression ‘den of thieves’ comes from Jeremiah’s famous ‘Temple Sermon’ (7:2b-15) which addresses the people’s foolish misconception that they can commit all manner of sin and then ‘flee’ to the Temple like a brigand to his cave, hoping to escape the consequences of their actions through participation in the cult...As a result, judgement is irrevocable and the Temple is to suffer a fate similar to that of the Shiloh shrine.⁶

This comparison to Jeremiah has explosive ramifications. Jesus is attacking the whole idea of a temple tax. He sees the selling of doves as an abuse of the poor, and his prohibition of vessels being carried about is an attack on profiteering by the establishment. In light of this comparison, the only thing remaining for the Temple and its leadership is judgment. No wonder his sermon provoked an enraged response.

C. An Angry Response (11:18,19)

And the chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for all the multitude was astonished at His teaching. And whenever evening came, they would go out of the city.

Following Jesus’ allusion to the fact that God would judge them, the chief priests and scribes respond the same way they did to Jeremiah’s pronouncements: they sought how to destroy him. But his power and authority have had too great an impact on the multitude. No action can be taken, at least for now. As Jerusalem had become too dangerous a place for Jesus to spend the night, he and his disciples made it their habit to retreat back to Bethany each evening for safe lodging, and that is what they do on this occasion.

III. Lessons on Prayer from the Fig Tree (12:20-26)

A. A Fig Tree Withered (12:20,21)

And as they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. And being reminded, Peter said to Him, “Rabbi, behold, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.”

Next morning they pass by the fig tree again and notice that a miracle has occurred. The leafy tree had completely

withered from the roots up, so that there was no prospect of it ever being revived. When the spiritually perceptive Peter points out this fact to the Lord, Jesus uses the tree as a parable to teach the disciples about removing obstacles in the kingdom.

Now we can understand the connection between the fig tree, which Jesus had cursed, and the temple. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the fig tree is a well-known symbol for the nation of Israel (cf. Hos 9:10; Nah 3:12; Zech 10:2). The tree was fully in leaf, but it lacked fruit. So too was the nation. Its spiritual center, the temple, was rife with religious activity but it bore no fruit. This made the temple ripe for judgement and, like the tree, it would never be revived. Both the temple and its sacrificial system were finished. Jesus would build a new one (Heb 12:22-24).

B. A Mountain Cast into the Sea (11:22,23)

And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it shall be granted him.

Again, bearing in mind the context of the prophets, we can grasp the implications of what Jesus is saying. The prophets foresaw a day when all obstacles to worship would be removed from among the nations. Mountains would be brought low, valleys lifted up, and all nations would come to worship the Lord. As Watts observes: "It is a feature of the 'Messianic Age' that all obstacles to God's returning people will be removed, particularly mountains (Isa 40:4; 45:2; 49:11; cf. 64:1-3)."⁸

In that context Jesus tells the disciples to have faith in God. With faith they can appropriate those prophetic promises, because that time had now arrived. "The 'moving of mountains' expected in the last days was now taking place."⁹ Through faith and believing prayer they could remove the obstacles that were preventing the nations from true worship of Yahweh. Not only would they be removed, they would be "cast into the sea." This is the same language which Mark used of Jesus casting out demons out of the Gerasene demoniac. Having been cast into the sea, that chaotic world, they would never return.

But then with poignant irony we are stunned to learn exactly what was the insurmountable obstacle to worldwide worship. It was, in Jesus' words, "**this mountain**" — Zion, the very temple mount itself. So corrupt had it become, rather than helping the nations worship it had grown to be the main obstacle to worship. So Jesus tells the disciples that if they have faith, they can say to "**this**" mountain, "Be taken up and cast into the sea," and if they do not doubt in their hearts, it will be done. Believing prayer can accomplish the impossible. So now Jerusalem is to be cleansed of its demons and its temple cast into the sea, not by force but by believing prayer.

Jesus goes on to make their faith even more radical.

C. The Greatest Promise and Obstacle of All (11:24,25)

"Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you.

Jesus now applies this principle of believing prayer across the board, applying it to all things for which we ask

(cf. Jas 1:5-8). It seems almost too good to be true. But before we can grasp how wonderful all of this is in the broadest of terms, Jesus brings the matter right home to the human heart. This is where we find the new temple of God being built, not in stone but in tablets of the human heart. Verse 25:

"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions."¹⁰

The phrase, "*whenever you stand praying, forgive,*" is a clear reference to 1 Kings 8, the occasion when Solomon dedicated the first Temple (1 Kgs 8:14,22). On that holy occasion, the king stood in front of the altar in the presence of the people and, lifting his hands towards heaven, uttered a lengthy prayer of dedication. He thanked God that he had fulfilled his covenant to grant David a seed to sit on his throne, and then explained that the primary purpose of this temple was that it be a house of prayer (8:27-30). Then he listed several petitions for times when God's people might go astray, and ended each petition with the expression, "hear in heaven, and **forgive** the sin of your people" (8:31-53). Solomon prayed that when foreigners came to this temple, God would hear their prayers and grant their requests (8:41-43).

Now here is Jesus, the new Son of David, speaking to the disciples as if they are shortly to be in their new role as kings, standing in prayer before the new temple, one built not with stones but with tablets of human hearts (1 Pet 2:5ff.). Jesus warns them that the greatest obstacle to the nations coming into the kingdom will not be gentile hostility but their own lack of forgiveness. Before they beseech God to forgive them they are told to forgive others. A hard and unforgiving heart is a mountain that needs to be removed before revival can break out. And it can be removed only by believing prayer.

If the disciples were slow to comprehend this radical statement about the power of forgiveness, they would shortly gaze upon an image that would forever burn it in their souls. Within a week they would see their king crucified. Hanging from that tree, with outstretched arms, he will cry out, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

IV. Four Exhortations

The thrust of our text establishes a sharp contrast to the "gentle" demeanor of our Lord which we observed in our last study. These verses center on his passionate concern for the world. They leave us with powerful implications for where we need to take swift and forceful action in our own lives. I will conclude with four exhortations.

A. Be Discerning

First, we need to be discerning about the fruit of our own lives. Don't be fooled by a lot of leaves; look for fruit. We can be consumed with religious activity and holy meetings yet we may never hear the voice of God, and are totally devoid of fruit. Our very lack of fruit renders us counter-productive to the purpose of the kingdom and the joy of leading others to Christ. If this describes you, don't be afraid to radically prune your tree, even lopping off whole branches in order to bear fruit. Pruning is painful

yes, but it is far better than having the whole tree cursed.

B. Take Control

Next, we need to be physical. The only time when Jesus got physically violent in the gospels was when the holy space for gentiles was overrun and desecrated. We live in an age where all holy space and holy time are overrun by what is commercial. Turn on the television to watch a show and you are bombarded with commercials. You can't even go to a restaurant to eat a meal without being surrounded by a bank of television monitors. Turn on your computer to work and you are drowned by an invasion of trivia on the Web. It's hard to create that space where we can hear the voice of God. So it is right for you to take control and set up holy boundaries where there is a safe place and time for you and your family and friends to pray to God. And it is right for you to guard those boundaries with some force. When our children were young, we kept dinner time sacred. Our phone was off the hook for two hours, between 6 and 8 p.m., in order to avoid commercial callers. It isn't wrong to turn off the TV, radio, computer or Walkman to create time and space for the holy, especially when we are approached by those on the outside seeking a place to worship. This is the age when the nations are coming to Zion, and it is our responsibility to create a holy time and space for them.

C. Have Faith

We are privileged to live in the age when God is making a highway of holiness to Zion, removing all obstacles in his path, especially mountains. So Jesus invites us to enter into the process and pray that all obstacles might be removed, especially those that are set up by the church. Identify the insurmountable obstacles that are preventing your friends from coming to Christ and pray that God will remove them and cast them into the sea. Nothing is impossible for God.

And don't be intimidated by the government outlawing prayer in the public schools and pushing God out of the center of American life. They can try, but it can't be done. The more they oppose prayer, the more dependent on prayer we become. Prayer is the most important activity you can engage in with non-Christians. Bring them into this court, speak to the Lord before them, and then leave them there in the presence of the Holy One.

D. Be Forgiving

And finally, always bring your prayer home. Picture yourself as Israel's king, standing in the shoes of the Son of David, hands raised to heaven, making supplication to God for revival among the nations. Now from that holy position, never forget the great obstacle that blocks the entrance to Zion for others. It is not the world's hatred of the cross; it is our inability to forgive that hostility once we receive it. Do you have a hard heart? Are you able to forgive someone who has deeply wronged you? Are layers of resentment choking your compassion? Would you like that mountain to be removed? Then pray, and your forgiveness of others will unleash powerful forces in heaven. Remember the story of Stephen (Acts 6:11ff.). He was accused of speaking against the temple. Facing his accusers, he had the countenance of an angel. When he was stoned by the Jews, he looked to heaven and, seeing Jesus, said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" As Stephen was speaking those words, Saul of Tarsus heard his cry and those very words became the goad that led him to Christ. Through that one man, Paul, nations came to Zion. As those nations march to Zion, don't you agree that Stephen would say his death was worth it?

Forgiveness moves the greatest mountains on earth. O Lord, lead us in that way. Amen.

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1. Robert Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 636.

2. Jesus' curse has jarred many a modern commentator as well. Note T. W. Manson's response: "It is a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill temper (for the supernatural energy employed to blast the unfortunate tree might have been more usefully expended in forcing a crop of figs out of season); and as it stands it is simply incredible." (T.W. Manson, "The Cleansing of the Temple," BJRL [1951] 259.)

3. Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 324 (cf. Isa 12:9; 15:39; 13:27; 66:18f; Zech 14:16; Mal 1:11).

4. Gundry, 642.

5. Quoted by C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 359.

6. Watts, 327.

7. These three observations come from R. Bauckham, quoted by Watts, 326.

8. Watts, 334

9. Watts, 334.

10. The best Greek manuscripts do not include v. 26. Most scholars think it is an addition from Matthew's text.



VIOLENCE IN THE VINEYARD

Catalog No. 1134
 Mark 11:27-12:12
 33rd Message
 Brian Morgan
 October 31st, 1999

The powerful movie *Saving Private Ryan* is the story of our country's mission to save but one man, the last remaining son of a family who already had lost three sons in World War II. The movie propels the audience into the D-Day invasion and takes us aboard a landing vessel bound for the beaches of Normandy. As the gangplank drops on the beach we come under withering machine-gun fire. Defenseless bodies are shot through or maimed hundreds of times. Corpses fall nameless into the cold hands of the beach. By morning's light the sea appears to have more bodies floating on the surface than there are fish in the deep. Silence shouts the only tribute over the watery grave. Seeing that movie did two things to me. It removed all my naïveté about the glory of war and the thought that people can be reclaimed from tyrannical demons without violent confrontation and extreme loss of life; and it spoke volumes about the character of fathers who place their sons in harm's way for something more valuable than life itself.

Mark does much the same for his readers in the section of his gospel to which we now come. He dispenses with our naïveté about the battle and reveals the glorious character of the Father who places his Son in harm's way for a salvation that is larger than life. In our last study we saw that Jesus took complete control of Israel's outer court, an area known as the court of the gentiles. Displaying ferocious authority, he cleansed that place of every vestige of commercialism, traffic and noise and restored it to its rightful place as a house of prayer for all the nations. Then he followed up these actions with a stinging sermon right out of the book of Jeremiah, in which he accused Israel's current leadership of turning God's house into a den of thieves.

In response to these events Israel's leaders arrive on the scene. From this point on in Mark's gospel there will be head to head confrontation of world forces in a cosmic battle that will decide the fate of a nation and the world.

I. By What Authority? (11:27-33)

A. Authority Challenged (11:27-28)

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, and scribes, and elders came to Him, and began saying to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things, who gave You this authority to do these things?"

These leaders, representatives of each official ruling party, were probably sent as an official delegation from the Sanhedrin. Their mission was to question Jesus about the events of the previous day that had shut down all commercial traffic and sacrificial transactions in the outer court of the gentiles. Into that rare quiet place of sanctity and prayer now storm Israel's leading officials, in full force, angry and armed to the teeth with authority and power. Spewing their venom, they waste no time on niceties. Gundry captures the powerful nuance of their disdainful questions: "By what authority are You doing of all things, *these things*?" and "Who gave You, *of all people*, this authority?" The purpose of their questions is not to inquire, but to put down, "to embarrass Jesus, to leave him defenseless, to expose him as an imposter."¹ But they don't know whom they are dealing with. As Rikki Watts observes: "Considering Mark's cumulative presentation of Jesus as representative true Israel, messianic 'servant,' Son of David, Son of Man, and even Yahweh-Warrior and Son of God, then to confront him concerning his authority is in effect to deny him the act of appropriation and to refuse him the right to rule. This is nothing if not mutiny."²

B. John and True Authority (11:29-30)

And Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. "Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me!"

Jesus will not be embarrassed or put on the defensive. He takes complete control of the situation, acting as if he were the ruling king. He refuses to answer their two questions until they answer the one question that he puts to them. And they have no option but to answer. He forces their hand with the command, "Answer Me!" "So pointed is the dilemma posed by these alternatives, so insistent Jesus' demand for an answer – he now repeats the demand – that the Sanhedrin fall into disarray."³

Thus Jesus delivers his one question: "Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me!" His mention of John is far more incriminating than a "mere verbal fencing match (Wright⁴). It probes them deeply, revealing where they went wrong. God's final prophetic word to his people in the Hebrew Scriptures was the announcement that he would send an Elijah-like messenger (Mal 4:5) to prepare the way for Israel's king. He would be Israel's final prophet, and would anoint the last King:

“Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts. (Mal 3:1)

John was Elijah, the voice crying in the wilderness (Isa 40:3-5) preaching a baptism of repentance to make ready for the coming king. But Israel’s leadership failed to submit to John’s ministry and refused to repent. Now Jesus, “the Lord of the Temple has come, cursed the fig-tree (cf. Mal 3:24 MT), and announced sentence (Jer 7:11). This is why Jesus points to John’s baptism: their refusal to prepare through repentance is the grounds for his announcement of judgment.”⁵

Whenever we take a wrong turn spiritually and end up on a slippery path, God in his grace will offer repentance. But repentance by definition means doing an about face and going back to where we made the wrong turn to start again from *there*. God will not have anything to do with subsequent issues until the first matter is dealt with. So before Israel’s leaders inquire about Jesus’ authority they must first come to terms with what they did to John.

C. Taking the Fifth Amendment

And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ “But shall we say, ‘From men?’— they were afraid of the multitude, for all considered John to have been a prophet indeed. And answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

After pondering among themselves every possible answer and its outcome, they realize that Jesus has backed them into a corner. There is no escape. Either John was a prophet, in which case they are guilty; or he was not, a response that would place them in an unpopular minority, jeopardizing their political careers. With neither alternative looking promising at this juncture, they come up with the best they can, an embarrassing, “We don’t know.” Jesus, who would not be embarrassed by their two questions, has now shamed them with but one (Gundry).

“Calvin’s comment is apt: ‘They do not inquire what is true, nor do they put the question to their own conscience; and they are so base as to choose rather to shuffle than to acknowledge what they know to be true, that their tyranny may not be impaired. In this manner, all wicked men, though they pretend to be desirous of learning, shut the gate of truth, if they feel it to be opposed to their wicked desires.’”⁶

But Jesus is not finished. He has a few more words to add to their shame.

II. The Parable of the Vine-growers (12:1-12)

A. Violence in the Vineyard (12:1-9)

And He began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard, and put a wall around it, and dug a vat under the wine press, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. And at the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vine-growers. And they took him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some, and killing others. He had one more, a beloved son; he sent him last of all to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those vine-growers said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, [cf. Gen. 37:20 Joseph’s brothers] and the inheritance will be ours!’ And they took him, and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

It was a common practice for ancient teachers and prophets to speak in parables so that they might be free to refer to things too controversial to utter out in the open, raising emotional barriers and perhaps provoking violent reaction. Thus the parable was a ploy designed to couch a story in veiled terms, outside the hearers, in order to lure them into the story. Once they were captured by the account they would make their own pronouncements, and to their surprise, condemn themselves, much as David did with Nathan’s parable (2 Sam 12:1-7).

As Jesus skillfully tells this story we are immediately drawn to the vineyard owner’s tender and thorough care. The man makes a huge initial capital investment to acquire and plant the vineyard, and spares no expense to maintain his investment with a protective wall and tower. He is indeed a generous man. He is trusting. He grants complete care of his vineyard to others while he leaves on a journey. And he is reasonable. He does not demand a huge profit; he expects to receive but “some of the fruit” from the vine-growers. Here then is a good man, a generous man, a trusting man, a reasonable man who places his entire investment into the hands of others.

In shocking contrast is the character of the vine-growers. Each time the owner sends a representative to collect on his behalf his slave is harshly treated, each one more severely than the one who preceded him. The first is beaten and sent away empty-handed; the second is struck in the head (an almost fatal blow) and severely shamed (a terrible fate in the Ancient Near East); and the third is killed. In the midst of such bloodshed and violence the infinite patience and long-suffering of the owner is astonishing. How can he keep sending more and more slaves into this violent vineyard only to receive the same treacherous treatment? What would impel him to such long-suffering?

Finally, the owner has but one servant left. This one is not a slave, but a son, an only beloved son (a poignant echo of Gen 22:2). As Gundry says, “that a father would risk a son adds pathos to surprise.”⁷ The owner reasons they will respect him. We are gripped in terror by his naïveté. All of his other slaves were either injured or killed. Why doesn’t he go and set things right himself? But he continues to trust, giving the vine-growers the benefit of the doubt. By now we are astonished that a man would risk not just capital, but a litany of lives, and finally an only son, to merely receive “some reasonable fruit” from what was rightfully his. When the son arrives we are aghast at the response he receives: He is seen as a threat. It is as if the owner had died and the son is coming to evict the tenants and claim his right to the vineyard. So the vine-growers plot his death (using the same language as Joseph’s brothers, Gen 37:20). In their crassness they think they can kill the heir and shamefully discard his body outside the vineyard, reasoning that the vineyard will be theirs. They are as guilty as Ahab, who murdered Naboth to seize his vineyard (1 Kgs 21:1-19). The equation between good and evil could not be more overdrawn, nor the impelling demand for a verdict of severe justice. The question finally lands.

B. Judgment on the Vine-growers (12:9)

“What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others.

Justice is finally decreed. The owner will come and destroy the vine-growers and give the vineyard into the care of others. With this the parable has worked its power. Before Jesus even asks the question, the hearers have already pronounced the verdict in their hearts. Now the cat is out of the bag!⁸ The parable is the age-old story of Israel, God’s beloved vineyard (Isa 5:1-7, Psa 80:8-13), retold by Jesus. God, the beloved owner, planted the vineyard, cared for it and left it in the care of others. When he looked for fruit there was none, yet he faithfully kept sending his prophets one after another (Jer 25:4; 26:5). But these faithful messengers were harshly treated and killed. Now the beloved Son has come. He, too, will die at their hands, and with that act the Sanhedrin will be destroyed and the vineyard given over to the care of others (Matt 12:28).

With their guilt now out in the open, Jesus summons a scripture that simultaneously sentences them and vindicates him. He concludes his story with a verse from the recently sung hymn of all the traveling pilgrims, Psalm 118.

C. Vindication of the Son-Stone (12:10-12)

**“Have you not even read this Scripture:
The stone which the builders rejected,
This became the head corner stone;
This came about from the Lord,
And it is marvelous in our eyes “? “**

And they were seeking to seize Him; and yet they feared the multitude; for they understood that He spoke the parable against them. And so they left Him, and went away.

The dead son, the stone⁹ rejected by the builders, will become the “head corner stone” of a new temple. Mark has brought us full circle. Not only does Jesus cleanse the temple and announce its demise, he now says there will be a new temple built in its place with him as the “head corner-stone” (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-7). The word can mean either the foundation stone around which everything else is measured, or the final “cap” stone. His hearers grasp the full meaning of what he has said. Yet what irony, that “it is their very ‘perception’ that sets in train their own demise” (Watts). So the power of the parable is truly seen, for “it not only informs, it acts” (Wright). They want to kill Jesus, but again, paralyzed by fear, they can do nothing, at least for now. He makes his escape, for his time is not yet fulfilled.

III. The Story Unfolds the Character of God

What implications can we draw from this “D-Day” of confrontation and violence? Few texts in the Bible tell the whole story of God’s relationship to his people, and in the telling, draw us in to tell us our story. The amazing parable of the vineyard portrays a glorious picture of salvation history unfolding the character of the God we serve. As we worship him in the true glory that is his, we become like him (2 Cor 3:18).

A. The Goodness and Generosity of God

This is a story about the goodness of God. The first thing we learn about him is that he is generous in the extreme. God plants a vineyard in Canaan, not a meager vineyard but one well endowed with everything needed to make it productive and well protected. And God spares no expense in planting and maintaining it. This image speaks of his generosity, one that began in Eden, was re-established in Israel, and is now bequeathed to his church. It demonstrates that God’s first concern is to lavish upon man every possible blessing at the rich banquet table of life. Life is a banquet table to be enjoyed by all! This is how I came to Christ, as God graciously answered my many personal prayer requests. This is how Christians ought to be perceived by others.

B. The Naïve Trust of God and the Glory of Man

Secondly, we learn that God is totally trusting. He turns this large capital investment over to man. In fact, so fully does he trust man, he feels free to go on vacation. This is something very few of us do with our capital investments, or our children, either. So we learn that the glory of man is to be trusted as a steward in God’s vineyard, with the expectation that he will cultivate it and produce fruit that all nations may eat of this rich feast of eternal life.

We serve a generous and trusting God.

But what happens when man proves faithless to care for God's vineyard? It is then we discover the forbearance of God.

C. The Forbearance of God

When God's worst fears are realized and the tenants are neither cultivating fruit nor feeding the nations but squandering the vineyard on themselves, God continues to believe in them. With naïve abandon, even after his prophets have faced terrible abuse, he keeps investing his precious messengers in them. What glory and dignity he bestows upon man! He chooses not to act on first, second, third or even fourth facts. He continues to reason and woo, believing that, given time, he can draw something good out of man's corrupt soul. As we begin to grasp this we realize the high value that God places on us as his original creation. The mystery is that man's persistent evil eventually brings the Son forth from out of the Father's heart. In the greatest act of love, the Father places the Son into that violent vineyard and does what no human father can do: he lets go and looks away.

As we begin to see how God acts, then we will want to do the same for others. It is an admirable thing to believe the best about others until events prove otherwise. It is greatness to keep believing in them once the worst facts are proven true. And it is divine to remain committed when bad character turns into destiny. Sometimes, like God, we go bankrupt in the process. But in that act, the fragrance of Christ's sacrifice is released in the world. This is the kind of radical love we need in the church today.

God is good, God is trusting, and God is forbearing.

D. The Judgment of God

The tragedy of our story is that man mistakes the forbearance of God with tolerance of sin. As the psalmist wrote,

**"These things you have done, and I kept silence;
you thought that I was altogether like you;
But I will rebuke you
and accuse you to your face."** (Psa 50:21)

Yes, God is extremely patient, but his forbearance is not without its limits. Notice that it is only after he has spent everything that he has and is bankrupt that he comes in judgment. Only after he has given his precious boy into their hands and has nothing left to give does he come to judge them. God's judgment is never hasty, impulsive or unreasonable, but when it comes, it does so with unrelenting severity. Jesus called it as a tribulation so severe it would be unparalleled in all of time (Mark 13:19).

Yes, this was the D-Day of the kingdom. Soon, cosmic forces would be unleashed and set in motion in one of the great war machines of all history, the Roman army. Jerusalem would be put under siege. Famine, pestilence and cannibalism would follow. Finally, Jerusalem's walls would be breached. Rape would follow pillage, and the city would be burned with fire and the temple destroyed. Not one stone would be left standing upon another. In the end there would be 1.2 million casualties. God does judge. Make no mistake about it.

Thus it remains a constant principle that the new cannot be built without the old being destroyed. Let us not be naïve. There is always a great collision of cosmic forces when the kingdom of God spreads on earth.

E. The Relentless Grace of God

But the good news is that in God's story, the last chapter is not judgment but unrelenting, free grace. That grace is demonstrated in the fact that when God restores what man has destroyed, he doesn't restore it to what it was before but makes it bigger and better. Yes, the vine-growers and their temple will be destroyed, but out of the rubble God will create a new temple, with the Son whom they killed at its very center. And this new temple will not be a mere reconstruction of the old and will not be built in stone. It will be built out of living stones, and when it is finished it will fill the whole creation. So Eden's vision will be fulfilled and every particle of earth will be invaded by heaven. And once again, this generous, trusting God leaves his most precious capital investment, what we now call the church, in the hands of men.

Hearing this story, how can we not fall at his feet in worship?

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1. Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 657.

2. Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 339.

3. Gundry, 658.

4. See Wright's excellent discussion of historical and theological background for this parable in N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 495-501.

5. Watts, 339.

6. Quoted by C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 363.

7. Gundry, 661.

8. "Juridical parables work by delaying the moment of self-identification until the hearers have passed judgment" (Watts, 345).

9. Scholars have noted the word play in Hebrew between son (*ben*), stone (*eben*) and builders (*banot*).



RIGHTING THE REVOLUTION

Catalog No. 1135

Mark 12:13-27

34th Message

Brian Morgan

November 7th, 1999

In our studies in the gospel of Mark we now come to five stories of heated controversy between the leaders of Israel and Jesus, following his arrival at the Temple as its rightful king. These five encounters, which balance the five stories of controversy of chapters 2 and 3, indicate that in the intervening time of Jesus' ministry of healings, miracles and teachings there has been no change of heart among Israel's leadership.

In the early chapters of Mark these leaders confronted Jesus in Galilee; now he confronts them in Jerusalem. He has cleansed the temple, announced its demise, and declared that he will build a new temple in its place with himself at its center. Jesus' claims and actions could hardly have been more confrontational. It is not surprising that they provoke the anger of the Sanhedrin. They want him dead, but they are unable to act for fear of the crowd. So they depart the scene, having been shamefully defeated by him.

How will they respond? What can they do to diminish the popularity of a rival king as well received as Jesus? They apply a time-honored strategy, one that is used in all political campaigns: they create enemies by getting their opponent to take a stand on a controversial issue that divides the populace. Then, once the opponent has committed himself to a certain position, he will be tied to the total party line and the rest of the population will become his enemies. This process is repeated over and over again until he has no friends left. Responding to this attempt of his enemies to pin him with their personal political agendas, Jesus forcefully "rights" the revolution. The result is that issues relating to the kingdom could not be clearer or their cutting edge more sharply defined. As the drama is played out we will be forced to ask ourselves to what degree has the Pharisee, the Herodian and the Sadducee in each of us dulled the cutting edge of the gospel.

I. Kingdom Loyalties: Caesar or God?¹ (12:13-17)

A. Feigned Flattery (12:13-15a)

And they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him, in order to trap Him in a statement [i.e., an unguarded word]. And they came and said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful, and defer to no one; You are not partial to any [lit., "You do not look into the face of men"], but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to pay a poll-tax to Caesar, or not? Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" (NASB)

Having departed in defeat the previous day, the San-

hedrin now send a delegation of opposition parties to stir up a slur campaign among Jesus' supporters. Two rival groups with a vehement hatred of each other, the Pharisees, who plotted revolution against Rome, and the Herodians, who had compromised with Rome to acquire political and economic power, now take center stage.

In contrast to their demeanor of the previous day when they vented their ire upon Jesus, they now come with an air of feigned deference and effusive flattery. Their words have a calculated dignity and perfect symmetry. The compliment, "teacher of truth," stands as bookends to their flattery of Jesus, with a reference to his impeccable "impartiality" doubly layered in between. Their perfect word selection is so sweet it is sickening. The irony of it all is that what they say is the absolute truth, yet its formality is so overdrawn it places their words at odds with the condition of their hearts. It takes little discernment to see through their diplomatic airs and sudden change of heart to the demonic ploy lying beneath the surface.

The events of the previous days have created an opportune time to force Jesus' hand. Since he has just cleansed the temple, thereby laying claim to be Israel's true king, these men are eager to discover what the Galilean revolutionary will say about paying the census-based poll and land tax. The Jews hated this tax. It had to be paid in Roman coinage stamped with the idolatrous image of Tiberius, proclaiming his supposedly divine ancestry as "the son of a god." It was a constant reminder to the Jews of the conquerors' pervasive pagan idolatry and their own subjection. So the Pharisees and the Herodians seek a ruling from Jesus, prefacing their remarks with the accolade that he defers to no one, and "does not *look* into the face of men." This is a most unusual phrase. The normal Hebrew expression, "to receive the face" (or "lift the face" of someone), when used in a good sense meant, "to be gracious towards," or, used in a bad sense, "to show partiality." The slight change is well crafted to flatter Jesus as an "extraordinarily scrupulous Jew"² who would not dare look upon the idolatrous face of Caesar.

Will this Galilean advocate the paying of taxes or not? The last revolutionary, Judas the Galilean, taught that "loyal Jews should not pay taxes to Caesar, since they have no master, no *despotes*, but YHWH, himself."³ What will Jesus say? If he instructs them to pay the poll tax, the Pharisees will say he supports idolatrous Rome and use his answer to undermine his popularity with

the crowd. If, on the other hand, he tells them not to pay the tax, the Herodians will accuse him of insurrection against Rome. Let the master speak.

B. Direct Exposure (12:15b-17)

But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at." And they brought one. And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" And they said to Him, "Caesar's." And Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were amazed at Him.

Before Jesus dignifies their question with an answer he exposes their evil motives and hypocrisy. Then he seizes the initiative by asking them to produce the coin in question that he might see it. His request accomplishes two things. It renders false their insinuation that he is "so pious that he never gazes at facial images stamped on Roman coins,"⁴ and it forces them to play their hand first. The very act of possessing the coin demonstrates their own hypocrisy!

Once the idolatrous coin is in hand, Jesus asks them to identify the likeness and inscription it bears. When they say that it is Caesar's, Jesus responds with the famous aphorism:

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

"On the surface it seems Jesus has made a neat division of loyalties: state and church."⁵ But in their historical context the implications of his response are much more subtle and powerful. When the Jews heard the phrase, "Give back to Caesar what is his due," they thought of revolution, of taking up arms and repaying the gentiles for their oppression. That was the Pharisaic way, invoked every Hanukkah in celebration of the Maccabean heroes who successfully fought against pagan enemies, cleansed the temple and refortified Jerusalem. So the battle cry became, "Pay back the Gentiles in full!"⁶ But here Jesus subverts that idea. He says that paying taxes to an idolatrous government is inconsequential to the kingdom of God; so send those idolatrous coins back from whence they came. What is of consequence is giving God the things that rightly belong to him. As Wright explains, he is evoking "the call to worship the one true God echoed in psalm and prophecy":⁶

**Give to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
Give to the LORD glory and strength.
Give to the LORD the glory of His name;
Bring an offering and come into His courts.
Worship the LORD in holy attire;
Tremble before Him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns."
(Psa 96:7-10; cf. 29:1-2)**

Give to God and God alone the honor that he deserves, not that which Caesar blasphemously claims. At this moment in history, Jesus' words would clearly im-

ply giving honor to God's Son and to the "way" he will reign over the nations. Ironically, both groups, Pharisees and Herodians, were blind to their own affirmation, "You teach *the way of God in truth*." While renouncing pagan idolatry, the Pharisees had actually adopted the pagan way of coercion and violence to introduce the kingdom. In Jesus' eyes they were as guilty of idolatry as the Herodians, who compromised with Rome in order to become rich and powerful.

Should they pay taxes or revolt? The real revolution would not come about by the non-payment of taxes and bloody revolt. It would come through Jesus' dying for the whole world. How ironic that the first person in the gospel of Mark to comprehend this was not a religious Jew but a pagan Roman centurion (Mk 15:39). Jesus did not defeat Rome by warring against her but by dying for her. Suffering to embrace others remains the most revolutionary force on earth.

C. A Political Balance

What a wonderful balance this is. It gives Christians the freedom to be in but not of the world; to use all things that belong in the world but not be used by them. The danger comes not in using the things of the world (like computers, credit cards, and e-mail), but in worshiping those things to gain status, wealth, control or comfort rather than using them for the salvation of others. We can know the difference by how we respond when Caesar calls his idols home. If we are giving God our affections then we can let go of what is Caesar's, knowing that it is inconsequential to the kingdom. Where idolatry is rampant, as it is in the valley in which we live, that might involve letting go of a promotion or the promise of wealth, or even suffering betrayal. Give back to Caesar that which belongs to him, but don't give him the devotion that God alone deserves. Let go of all idols and give your devotion to God.

When we are dealing with evil, however, it is tempting to take the approach of the Pharisees—isolating ourselves from the world in a posture of non-involvement and attacking evil, seeking to overpower it with the methods of the world. This was the way of the so-called "religious right" of recent years. They were correct in the values they affirmed but wrong in the methods they employed. Instead of winning the world to Christ they dulled their swords of love, which are capable of cutting through the hardest of hearts. Let us never forget that the way of the truth is the way of the cross. Jesus is adamant that this sword remain sharp.

II. Rationalists and the Resurrection (12:18-27)

A. Placing Moses against Jesus (12:18-23)

And some Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection) came to Him, and began questioning Him, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, and leaves behind a wife, and leaves no child, his brother should take the wife, and raise up offspring to his brother. There were seven brothers; and the first took a wife, and died,

leaving no offspring. And the second one took her, and died, leaving behind no offspring; and the third likewise; and so all seven left no offspring. Last of all the woman died also. In the resurrection, when they rise again, which one's wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife."

With the failure of the Pharisees and the Herodians to label Jesus in their own terms, the Sadducees now arrive on the scene.

The Sadducees were the aristocratic party, made up of the high priestly and leading lay families of Jerusalem. They were wealthy and worldly. Their arrogance and their harshness in the administration of justice were notorious. Conservative in doctrine, they rejected what they regarded as pharisaic innovations; but their main concern was for the maintenance of their privileges, not for doctrinal purity.⁸

Mark records that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection (cf. Acts 23:6-8), and probably regarded only the Pentateuch (the first five books of Moses) as authoritative. The spark for this second debate arose from the fact that Jesus had just predicted his own death, in the vineyard parable, saying that afterwards he would become the foundation stone for a new temple. The thought of a new temple built around the risen Christ shattered every vestige of the Sadducees' good reason. So, armed with the teaching of Moses, they now seek to make Jesus' teaching look ridiculous. They build their hypothetical case around the word "resurrection" (verses 18, 19, 23), which Moses used to describe levirate marriage, in Deut 25:5. If a man died without seed in Israel, his brother was under obligation to "raise up" seed for him so that his name would continue in the land. The Sadducees reasoned that this was the real meaning of resurrection. But, if Jesus' position were true, and this woman survived the deaths of seven husbands, then, because of Moses' law, in the resurrection she would have seven husbands all at the same time. This "would make shambles of the Mosaic Law...A man might practice polygamy, but a woman? In the resurrection? Out of the question!"⁹ Now that they have pushed the ridiculous to the absurd, the Sadducees rest their case.

B. Blind to Moses and to God (12:24-27)

Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures, or the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But regarding the fact that the dead rise again, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; you are greatly mistaken."

Wasting no time with polite niceties, Jesus comes right out and calls a spade a spade. If the Sadducees

built their case around the word "resurrection," Jesus frames his case around the word "deceived": "You are deceived"... "You are greatly deceived" (12:24, 27). Their failure to understand the doctrine of the resurrection was due to their lack of insight regarding their own law. If they truly read the Scriptures they would see the power of God demonstrated everywhere. It was a power that brought life out of Abraham's dead body, raised the needy out of the ash heap, summoned Israel out of Egypt, and was able to change the very conditions of life itself. Even their own prayers known as the *gevurot*, "powers," declare of God, "You quicken the dead with great mercy...and keep your faith to them that sleep in the dust."¹⁰ So, says Jesus, we must not attempt to project our narrow categories of life into the resurrection. It's a brand new world! When the dead are raised, they are spiritual beings, like the angels (of course, the Sadducees didn't believe in angels, either), and there is no marriage. In essence, we shall all be the bride of Christ. So instead of one woman with seven husbands, there is actually one Husband and one bride drawn from all the nations.

And regarding the fact of the resurrection,¹¹ Jesus chides the Sadducees for not treating Moses seriously enough to grasp the implications of what he wrote. In Moses' very first encounter with God, God addressed him with the title, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God Jacob" (Exod 3:6). How could God give himself such a name if he was the God of men no longer living? And how absurd, to say that God was fulfilling his covenantal promises to these men but they would never come to life to see it. This same attitude often prevails among Christians at funerals. Grief-stricken relatives speak as if deceased believers were not alive to see what God had done on their behalf. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are alive and one day they will meet all their spiritual seed, believers from every nation, you and me, face to face.

C. Modern Day Rationalists

Most of us feel free from the temptation to rationalism that plagued the Sadducees. Doesn't everyone believe in the resurrection? you ask. Yes and no. As evangelicals, we see ourselves as individuals raised from the dead at the end of the age but, like the Sadducees, we project the categories of our world into that age. And now that Christ has been raised we also diminish the glory of what God is doing in this age. We read the promises made by the prophets to Israel and with a rationalistic lens reconstruct them with a literalism that denies the death and resurrection of Jesus, not to mention the transcendent new dimensions of his new temple. No matter what your view of eschatology is you must view every prophetic promise through the lens of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Do we really believe in the resurrection? Do we read our Scriptures and believe in the power of God that the conditions of all of life itself are changed? If we do, then our identity in this life will not come from our human

relationships but from being the bride of Christ.

This has tremendous implications. It means that there is something much deeper than our sexuality. Despite what Hollywood would have us think, sexuality cannot be the driving focus of life. It isn't large enough. Because we are made in God's image, sexuality must be transcended by something much larger, something the Bible calls worship. Just as Moses wrote that there was a higher love than "romantic love" in marriage, a "loyal-love" that transcended romance to provide offspring for a dead brother, so now there is a higher love that transcends all human relationships. That love is found in being the bride of Christ. Sex pales in comparison to this kind of love.

Do we really believe in the resurrection? If we do, we will not regard singleness as a second class estate but as a sacred calling that is higher than marriage. Single people are already living out their total devotion to Christ as his bride. We regard widows in the same light, as women we should feel privileged to learn from. And if we really believe in the resurrection we will regard in a different light couples who cannot have children. We will see their tears of barrenness as painful, yes, but also as the holy gateway to fertility, for, as Isaiah predicted, the "sons of the barren and desolate shall be more numerous than the sons of the married woman" (Is 54:1). And we will rejoice in anticipation that through their pain, many, many spiritual children, too numerous to count, will be born, so that every ounce of the pain is exponentially increasing the capacity for joy.

Do we really believe in the resurrection? There is much I could say, but let me end with this. The resurrection re-frames our life both while we are here on earth and after we die. Those of you who have lost precious loved ones know that their death makes heaven more precious. While you live in the ache of reunion, you can almost hear them singing in the wind, as a holy oboe playing in the air. The resurrection shapes our life. Then, after we die, it's hardly over. God is going to continue to do countless things to love us, things we could not begin to comprehend in our lifetime. And when it's done, he will introduce us to all of these gifts by name, each as precious as a firstborn.

Imagine C.S. Lewis in the resurrection. Lewis never thought he would find joy in life but was surprised by an "inconsolable stab of Joy" In his old age he was given a tremor of bliss in marriage, a happiness that collapsed in sorrow with the loss of his wife. His was an inconsolable grief from which he never recovered. Lewis never sought the spotlight and never had children. However, he wrote children's stories as a distraction during wartime, tales that found their way into millions of child-like hearts. Can you imagine the scene at the wedding of Lamb, when his eyes open to see his Joy, and then the door to the wardrobe will swing open and

his countless children of every race come singing into Narnia?

III. Re-Righting our Revolution

Jesus came to inaugurate a kingdom that was radical and revolutionary, and he is determined that it will not fall into the hands of opportunists to pervert it or use it to fit their own agendas. Every perversion takes away the radical edge of what he came to do, reducing it to finite human categories. To make sure that doesn't happen, as readers we are allowed to feel the weight of this controversial confrontation, with Jesus righting the revolution before his climactic passion. The corrections once written stand to rebuke us in every age when we are gripped by the same temptation.

As for this story, each group missed major things. The Herodians and the Pharisees both were blind to the "way of God," the cross; the Sadducees were blind to the vindication of God's promises in the resurrection. All were held captive by a view of the kingdom that was static, or at best a reconstruction of the old. All were frozen in time and missed the dynamic of what God was doing in history. Worst of all, they missed God himself, and as a result missed out on being human. Do not make the same mistake. Keep the cross and the resurrection of Jesus the one thing, the main thing, the only thing.

1. I have relied heavily on N.T. Wright's excellent discussion of "Tribute to Caesar" in his work, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 502-507.

2. Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 693.

3. Wright, 502.

4. Gundry, 694.

5. Wright, 503.

6. Wright, 504, gives a marvelous quote filling in the background:

"As the old revolutionary Mattathias was preparing to die, he made a speech to his sons, exhorting them to zeal for the law, and invoking the zealous heroes of old. The speech ends as follows:

'Judas Maccabaeus has been a mighty warrior from his youth; he shall command the army for you and fight the battle against the peoples. You shall rally around you all who observe the law, and avenge the wrong done to your people. Pay back the Gentiles in full, and obey the commands of the law.'

With that, Mattathias died. The sequel, as we have seen, is that Judas took command, led the revolt, fought the battle, defeated the pagan army, cleansed and restored the Temple, reformed Jerusalem – and established a royal dynasty that lasted for a hundred years."

7. Wright, 505.

8. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark*. Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge UP, 1959) 373.

9. Gundry, 702.

10. Cranfield, 374.

11. Other texts which give a clear reference to the resurrection in the Old Testament are Dan 12:1-2; Isa 26:19; Ezek 37:1-14; Job 19:25-27; Prov 12:28.

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A SCRIBE, A SON, AND A WIDOW

Catalog No. 1136

Mark 12:28-44

35th Message

Brian Morgan

November 14th, 1999

We have begun to look at five stories¹ of controversy in Mark's gospel between Israel's leadership and Jesus. These encounters come after Jesus has cleansed the temple and pronounced judgment on the nation's leaders. In our last study we examined the opening two stories. Jesus was challenged, first, by the Pharisees and the Herodians, on the matter of paying taxes to Caesar; and second, by the Sadducees, on the doctrine of the resurrection. Jesus skillfully silenced all three parties by his amazing recourse to the Hebrew scriptures, leaving his hearers with an uncompromising clarity on the way of the cross and resurrection. The next three stories, built around three characters, a scribe, a son, and a widow, take a dramatic turn, from the negative to the positive, and from group debate to individual encounter. These three brief cameos capture the essence of our faith. Together they trace our spiritual journey, how we proceed from study, to worship, to action. If you are the kind of person who wants to quickly get to the bottom line, this text is for you.

I. A Searching Scribe (12:28-34)

A. Searching for the Main Thing (12:28-31)

And one of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (NASB)

From the dust of debate emerges a scribe seeking to cut through the theological quagmire and get to the heart of things. His question is honest, apt, and central to everything. Jesus must have been encouraged by his honesty. In the midst of all the arrogant posturing and moral complacency that was going on, here was one who longed for the truth. Instead of placing Jesus on the defensive over some doctrinal issue, this man asks what is the most important commandment. Given the length and complexity of the whole law, this is something every good teacher should know. Wessel comments:

The rabbis counted 613 individual statutes in the law, 365 which were negative and 248 positive. Attempts were made to differentiate between the "heavy," or

"great," and the "light," or "little," commandments. The rabbis also made attempts to formulate great principles from which the rest of the law could be deduced. The most famous example comes from Hillel, who when challenged by a Gentile, 'Make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the whole law while I stand on one foot,' replied, 'What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole law, the rest is commentary; go and learn.'²

Jesus' answer is radically different from Hillel's. He takes a positive slant, quoting the heart of the law, Deut 6:4-5:

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

This commandment sums up the two most basic tenets of Israel's theology, monotheism and election: "There is one God, and Israel is His people" (Wright). It speaks of the undividedness of God and Israel's unique relationship to him. The concept of God being "one" is best understood relationally: there is no division in God's character. He has complete integrity. There is no division in who he is or what he says. When God makes a commitment to man, that is what drives history, no matter what the cost. This was the commandment that God gave after he had saved Israel from bondage in Egypt, in fulfillment to his promise to give Abraham a seed and a land.

The fact of God's oneness becomes the basis for the foremost commandment: that man, in response to this gift of salvation, love God with his whole heart. The Hebrew idea of "heart" encompasses all that is hidden and inaccessible within—the totality of one's inner life. That one phrase would have been sufficient to express the idea of totality, but the Hebrew text in Deuteronomy adds two more emphatic uses of the word "all" to drive the point home: "*all your soul, and all your strength.*" Jesus quotes the Greek translation, which added a fourth tone, "*with all your mind.*" The point could not be more emphatic. Because God is one, man must give him all his affections, with no division in his heart. That is the driving force of all religion. Religion is not about knowing about God or being a scholar, but loving God from the heart. God longs for lovers.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes to on quote from Leviticus 19:18, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" The importance of this cannot be overstated.

Jesus is saying that loving God means loving one's neighbor, in whose image that person is made. The two do not come into conflict, nor do they exist in isolation. Worship must precede ethics, but it never negates ethics or leaves us isolated from community. Full-throated praise must be echoed with wipe-open arms. The stronger one's spirituality the stronger one's passion must be to reach out with total abandon and care for others. As the climactic song in *Les Misérables* asserts, "To love another person is to see the face of God." Jesus' final statement, "There is no other commandment greater than these," inseparably seals the two into one—a marriage of divine proportions. What God has joined together let not man separate.

A story that illustrates this well is Abraham's encounter with the three strangers, in Genesis 18. When Abraham saw these men approaching his tent, he ran to greet them and implored them to come in for food, refreshment and rest. He told Sarah to knead some bread, while he ran to his herd to get the choicest calf and richest milk. Then he served this "thanksgiving meal" to his unknown guests in the beauty and cool of the shade. Here was a husband and wife who loved strangers with their whole heart. Little did they know that their gift was worship of the highest kind, for their guests were deity and angels in disguise. And what rewards they reaped! May your Thanksgiving be so enriched.

This picture says that the essence of spirituality is the complete integration of mind and heart. It is wholehearted love toward God, a love that unifies everything in us. It also identifies fragmentation as the most dangerous enemy to spirituality. I find that the older I get, the less things I want to be involved in, because when I do something I want to do it wholeheartedly. So my motto is, "Do little and do it well." If we can't do something with the whole heart, then it is better not to do it at all.

How will this scribe react to Jesus' answer?

B. Joy in the Main Thing (12:32-33)

And the scribe said to Him, "Right, Teacher, You have truly stated that He is One; and there is no one else besides Him; and to love Him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as himself, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Unlike his colleagues, this man assumes no feigned flattery. He comes with neither craft nor cunning, nothing but pure assent, appreciation and admiration for Jesus. And, going further, with deep insight into the scriptures he adds that these essentials mean much more to the heart of God than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. That is an amazing statement, coming from a Jew who is standing inside the temple precincts just before Passover. This was what David discovered a thousand years earlier (Ps 51:15-17). It was taught over and over again by Israel's sages and prophets.³ This scribe knew deep down that the whole sacrificial sys-

tem was symbolic of deeper realities of the heart, and if those were not understood, rituals meant nothing (Psa 50:7-15). At times, when their full meaning was grasped, rituals were freely forgone (Psa 51:15-17).⁴

Jesus is moved by the scribe's response.

C. Close to the Kingdom (12:34)

And when Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that, no one would venture to ask Him any more questions.

Jesus is impressed that this man is honest, spiritually sensitive, and that he has pure motives. So Jesus responds in kind, with honesty and forthrightness, telling him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." His answer amazes everyone, not only for its positive affirmation but its undisclosed mystery: "not far." The man was close, but he was not yet "in." He was "not far" from the kingdom because he had faith to see the essentials in the law. He knew that loving God and man with the whole heart meant everything, but he was not yet in, because he was not yet aware that he was standing in front of the King who was about to inaugurate a new covenant. As Jeremiah predicted:

"I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them *singleness of heart and action*, (lit. "one heart and one way") so that they will always fear me" (Jer 32:37-39, NIV; cf. Ezek 11:19).

With the advent of the new covenant the law would be written on human hearts, with the result that man would have an undivided heart. At the same time the sacrificial system would become outdated and redundant (Wright). True faith means not only being spiritually sensitive to the scriptures we study but also sensitive to what God is doing in the present. God is dynamic. He is not static. A Jew with real faith knows that his religion is not merely symbolic, it is also typological. Israel's religion is not only a shadow of heavenly realities, it is also "prophetic," pointing forward to a day when those realities would come to earth; then the shadows would be done away with. Thus, if one is "not far from the kingdom of God," the eschatological moment is near: the King is present and about to inaugurate his kingdom. It's one thing to know what life is about; it's quite another to get on the train and go where it is going.

With that answer the awestruck crowd is silenced. There are no more questions for this King. Now, from out of the silence, Jesus poses a question to bridge the chasm between those who are "close" and those who are "in."

II. A Royal Riddle: David's Son (12:35-37)

And Jesus answering began to say, as He taught in the temple, "How is it that the scribes say that the

Christ is the son of David? David himself said in the Holy Spirit, 'The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit at My right hand, Until I put your enemies beneath your feet.' David himself calls Him 'Lord'; and so in what sense is He his son?"

So who is Israel's Messiah king? Of course, the universal answer given by the scribes was, "the son of David" (2 Sam 7:12-14; Isa 11:1,10; Jer 23:5). To that biblically correct answer Jesus now adds another text, one which the rabbis rarely used with regard to the Messiah, Psalm 110. Jesus says, "You call him son of David, but when David saw him exalted at God's right hand, he called him lord." "Yahweh said to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand...'" And David spoke this by the Holy Spirit.⁵ This is God-inspired scripture. So, if he is David's Lord, in what sense can he be his son? As Moule says: "Because, although he is his son by descent and therefore his junior in age, he is also in some mysterious way, superior to David and therefore his senior in rank."

Could it be that David was given a vision of one of his descendents exalted to the place of such high honor that only the title "Lord" would be appropriate? and when David caught the vision, he worshipped his future son as his King and Lord? Does that re-define what sonship means? Jesus is never bothered by theological tensions. Pushing the theological envelope past orthodox boundaries is not a problem to him. Psalm 110 does redefine what sonship means. David goes on to say that this new king will also be "a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." That means the king "will supersede the present high-priestly regime"⁶ (cf. Zech 3:1-4:14). So Jesus has declared that the temple will be destroyed, its sacrifices replaced, and now with this text, adds that the priesthood will be superseded as well. In declaring that he is David's son and Israel's true King he is saying that there will be a lot of unemployed priests in Jerusalem.

But this vision of the Son is essential to entry into the kingdom of God. It is not enough to know what God requires, you must also see that he has paid all the requirements. He is a king who is also our sacrifice, a king who is our high priest, a king who writes the law on human hearts, and a king who by his death and resurrection is now exalted at the right hand of God. This is a king for whom there is no title worthy other than Lord. And once you have a vision of that king in the scriptures your faith moves you to worship. And so we sing with the poet,

Do this and live the law commands
but gives me neither feet nor hands,
a better way does grace doth bring,
it bids me fly and gives me wings.

Now, having worshipped, we are in a place to act, not depending on ourselves but trusting his resources within us to be our adequacy.

Next, Mark changes the focus from a searching scribe and an exalted son to hypocritical scribes and an extrav-

agant widow.

III. An Extravagant Widow (12:38-44)

A. Devouring Widows (12:38-40)

And the great crowd enjoyed listening to Him. And in His teaching He was saying: "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation."

Continuing his teaching in the temple, Jesus now takes this opportunity before a great and captive audience to deliver them from religious exploitation. Ezekiel predicted that God would one day send a new David to deliver his sheep from oppressive shepherds (Ezek 34). That day had come, and right there in the temple, Jesus publicly unmask Israel's scribes for the hypocrites they are. He says they do not serve for love of God or the sheep, but for the honor and prestige religion bestows. They loved to lengthen their prayer shawls (*tallit*) to show how learned they were. It's one thing to wear a multi-colored scarf at graduation, but quite another to go parading around in it every day at the mall! But this is what the scribes did, bestowing upon themselves an air of respectability as they strutted around the marketplace. They also loved the deference they received by occupying the choicest seats on every occasion. (The chief seat in the synagogue "was the bench in front of the ark (containing the scriptures) and facing the people."⁷)

Despite their outward show of piety, however, underneath they were oppressive and brutal. In Old Testament times, teachers of the law were not allowed to receive payment for their services, making them dependent on gifts from patrons. But greedy teachers abused the system by preying on the generous hospitality of widows. Once they became ingratiated with their prey they would not hesitate to devour their estates and cover up their own crimes with long public prayers. Jesus says their judgment will be greater (cf. Jas 3:1).

Be careful with the honor you bestow on your leaders. Appreciation is welcomed and needed, but deference is damaging, and financial perks can be very destructive to motives. The purpose of religion is not to bestow perks on it leaders but with what follows now.

B. Worshipping Widows (12:41-44)

And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the multitude were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. And calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her pover-

ty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.”

Taking his seat opposite the treasury, Jesus observes the spectacle before him. The “treasury” is probably a reference to “the thirteen trumpet-shaped receptacles which, according to the Mishnah, were placed against the wall of the Court of the Women.”⁸ As he is sitting there, crowds of people press forward to contribute their gifts to the temple. Each contribution resounded with a loud clanging noise as the coins were thrown into the trumpet-like receptacles. And everyone knew when the rich made their weighty deposits, because the noise would ring out across the entire court.

Into this scene now enters a poor widow. Her poverty could very well have come about because the scribes had devoured her estate. Yet she is not bitter. She hasn't come to the temple for justice, but to worship. Pressing forward, she throws in two *lepta*, the smallest coins in circulation, about 1/8 cent apiece.⁹ They barely make a trumpet sound. She had but two coins. She could have kept one, but she threw in both—her very life—for she loved God with her whole heart and gave him her complete adoration. Such faith so deeply touches Jesus he hurriedly calls his disciples to instruct them about it. To their surprise they learn that she, not the rich, was the greatest contributor to the treasury.

God is moved not by the amount of the gift but the trust and love which the gift symbolizes. The gifts of the rich were not burdensome to them. What were they but a generous tip taken out of their surplus. The poor widow's gift, although tiny, was symbolic of her complete surrender to God. With those two weightless coins she has cast herself whole into the arms of God. Her glowing example, though nameless and small, has motivated more selfless giving to the kingdom than all the wealth of the rich. Hers was the kind of giving I benefited from years ago in Romania. In a country where food rationing was strict and stringent (five eggs per family, per month), I often found two eggs on my plate at meal-times. This is the kind of love that makes one want to give all! Calvin made the point well: “The poor, who appear not to have the power of doing good, are encouraged by our Lord not to hesitate to express their affections cheerfully out of their slender means; for if they consecrate themselves, their offering, which appears to men to be worthless, will not be less valuable than if they had presented all the treasures of Croesus.”¹⁰

IV. A Scribe, a Son, and a Widow

We can see the stories of these three, the scribe, the son, and the widow, as metaphors for our own journey of faith. With the scribe, we see that the essence of spirituality begins with the “ear” (“Hear O Israel!”).¹¹ We encounter God through hearing of his word. And we see that the driving force of his word is not religious dogma but relationships—loving God and neighbor with the

whole heart. That's the bottom line. So be a good scribe and ask the right questions.

But even with that clear mandate we are not yet ready to act until we get a vision of the Son. We must first see that everything God requires of us he has already provided in David's greater Son. That Son, who became our sacrifice and is now exalted as our advocate high priest, has made that holy temple our playground. We are fully accepted just as we are. He is not ashamed to call us brothers. That means we are sons! It is when we hear the Father's voice crying “son!” into our heart that we are able to worship. A good scribe has become an accepted son.

And finally, the son lives like the widow. Worship leads us to live with outrageous, abandoned love, knowing that the Father is at work in us and through us, making every moment the holy present. So a widow's holy action, a rare sight in the temple under the old covenant, now becomes commonplace in the community of the new covenant, and this amazing story of a scribe, a son, and a widow becomes a precious cameo of our soul's journey into faith.

1. Note the *chiastic* structure of these five stories:

A. The reluctant *giving* of taxes to Caesar

B. The *resurrection* debate

X. The greatest commandment: *loving God and neighbor*

B'. The Son of David *exalted*: Psalm 110

A'. The extravagant giving of a widow to God

2. Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 736-737.

3. See 1 Sam 15:22; Isa 1:11-18; 43:22-24; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8; Psa 50:7-15; Prov 15:8; 21:27; 28:9.

4. Though David discovered this truth, it was too radical for his descendants who used the Psalm after the exile to petition God to rebuild their city. They “restored” the sacrifices back into the text (51:18-19).

5. On the inspiration of Scripture by the Holy Spirit see Acts 1:16; 4:25; 28:25; Heb 3:7; 9:8; 10:15; 2 Tim 3:16, and 2 Pet 1:21.

6. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 509.

7. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark*. Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge UP, 1959) 384.

8. Cranfield, 386.

9. Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 729, adds, “They amount to no more than a quadrans (the smallest Roman coin, worth 1/144 of a denarius before Nero's devaluation of the denarius, 1/64 of a denarius after his devaluation, a denarius being the daily wage of a manual laborer in Matt 20:1-16). In defining two *lepta* as ‘a quadrans,’ Mark uses a Latin loan word to make sure his Roman audience do not miss the seeming smallness of the gift, which will make Jesus' comment the more startling in its power to upset popularly held opinion.”

10. Quoted by Cranfield, 387.

11. I am very thankful to Dr. Bruce Waltke for this insight.

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THE BEGINNING OF LABOR

Catalog No. 1137

Mark 13:1-13

36th Message

Brian Morgan

November 28th, 1999

In the thirteenth chapter of Mark's gospel we come now to the end of what we have termed five controversy stories. In Mark 11, Jesus entered the temple as its true owner and king. Following his rejection by Israel's leadership he pronounced judgment upon them and established his supreme authority over all. Every challenger, every opponent was silenced and shamed. In the midst of the blaze of this controversy, Jesus emerged as the Son of God (the true Israel), Isaiah's suffering Servant, David's greater Son, and Malachi's Lord of the Temple who would destroy the existing temple and build a new one in its place.

These amazing claims would be downright blasphemous were they not true. As this high court drama concludes now, the disciples will get a clear picture concerning what all of this means to them. How gracious of our Lord to spell out the implications of these events for the disciples! While many have described this text as mysteriously apocalyptic, I find it to be straightforward and pastoral in nature. Though it is replete with Old Testament prophetic allusions its main thrust is pastoral: it is designed to prepare the disciples for the events that are about to take place, and to secure them in their role.

The chapter has five divisions:

1. The Announcement of the Destruction of Jerusalem (1-2)
2. The Beginning of Labor Pains (3-13)
3. The Great Tribulation (14-23)
4. The Presence of the Son of Man and Vindication of the Suffering Saints (24-27)
5. Final Warnings Concerning the Day (28-31).¹

We will examine the first two divisions today, and conclude with the final three next week.

Before we come to the text, I want to confess that I am still growing in my understanding of how to interpret it. Therefore, what I offer I do so humbly, knowing there is a great divergence of opinion among scholars regarding these verses. The point of confusion revolves around how much of this material is related to the destruction of the temple, in AD 70, and to what extent Jesus is speaking of his second coming. How shall we find coherence between these two events? The method I have adopted is to look at these verses first, in the context of the book of Mark, in other words, strictly from the disciples' point of view. What did Jesus' statements mean to the twelve? Before we try to unravel the meaning of the text we have to find what it meant to the apostles, within the larger context of Mark's gospel. Once we discover that we can apply it typologically, which is to say that what God did in AD 30-70 in Israel can be seen as a type or microcosm of what occurs among the nations in the history of the world. It is my

opinion that this is how this text shaped the apostles' view of Jesus' return.

I. Jesus Announces the Destruction of the Temple (13:1-2)

And as He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another which will not be torn down." (NASB)

As Jesus and his band leave the temple area one of his disciples is caught up by the grandeur of the temple, its massive foundation stones and surrounding buildings. Josephus records that some of those stones were quite large, twenty-five cubits (38 ft.) long, eight cubits (12 ft.) high, and twelve cubits (18 ft.) wide (*Ant.* 15.392 [xi]). It is difficult for us to comprehend what an architectural wonder this sight was in the ancient world. Wessel points out in his commentary:

The temple area...had been rebuilt by Herod the Great. The courtyard had been greatly enlarged...in order to accommodate the large throngs of Jews who came to Jerusalem for the festivals. To accomplish this a huge platform had to be erected to compensate for the sharp falling off of the land to the southeast. An enormous retaining wall was built to hold the platform in place. The massive stones used in the construction of this wall may still be seen today, since part of the wall escaped the destruction of AD 70. At the southeast corner the temple platform towered two hundred feet above the Kidron Valley.

In addition to the temple building itself, on the platform stood porticoes and cloistered courts flanked by beautiful colonnades. The temple area covered approximately one-sixth of the area of the city of Jerusalem. It was an architectural wonder and its size and location dominated the ancient city.²

But, despite the magnificence of the buildings, and the massive weight of the foundation stones, their permanence was a mere illusion. Jesus predicts once again that this mountain will be "**cast into the sea**" (Mk 11:23), and in the tradition of Micah (3:12) and Jeremiah (7:14), declares that "not one stone shall be left upon the other." The metaphor (hyperbole) implies that there will be a complete and thorough destruction of the temple. This shocking statement must have stunned the disciples, provoking much discussion among them as they made the steep hike up to the Mount of Olives.³

A group of them even began to question Jesus privately about it. Verses 3-4:

And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?"

Arriving at the summit, with the glory of the city in full view, four of the disciples take Jesus aside to ask him about the timing of what he had just predicted. Their question is quite straightforward. It is important to view it in the context of the book of Mark and refrain from reading other questions into it. Jesus has just announced the destruction of the temple and its surrounding buildings and the disciples are curious to know when "*these things*" will take place. When will the things that Jesus has just predicted occur, and what will be the signs leading up to them? Richard France⁴ has done an excellent job of pointing out the precise grammatical indicators which, when linked together, give a clear chronological sequence to the text.

The disciples open with the question, "*when will these things be?*" and Jesus concludes with, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until *all these things* take place" (13:30). Jesus stakes his credibility on the fact that everything he says between verses 5-30 will happen within the disciples' generation. They will see it while they are yet alive, but it will not be soon. Therefore they are not to be misled, for many things must yet take place before it happens, and they have much work to do in advance of that day. With supreme pastoral care Jesus leads the disciples through the next forty years so they will not be surprised with regard to what to expect or what to do in the midst of the stress. The metaphor that holds "*all these things*" together is the well known Hebrew image of the *labor pains of childbirth* (Isa 13:8; 26:17; Jer 4:31; 6:24; Mic 4:9-10). "By this time it was almost a special term for 'the birth pangs of the Messiah,' the period of distress preceding the Messianic Age."⁵

II. Beginning Labor Pains (13:5-13)

A. False Messiahs (13:5-6)

And Jesus began to say to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He!' and will mislead many.

Jesus begins by issuing a warning to the disciples to not be deceived. The coming decades will be dominated by power-hungry terrorist groups who would put forth many Messianic pretenders promising liberation from Rome. Josephus in his writings records some of these pretenders. They include John of Gischala, from Galilee, the leader of the Zealots; Simon ben Giora, the most serious contender for King of the Jews, whose movement lasted nearly two years; Judas the Egyptian who claimed to restore Israel; and Menahem, descendent of Judas the Galilean, who emerged from a group of professionally trained dagger-carrying assassins called the Sicarii.⁶ The Sicarii would mix in among large festival crowds and murder their victims with curved daggers concealed under their garments, and then slip away undetected. It was this last cadre of rebels that banded together and stormed the fortress of Masada, putting to death the Roman garrison. Jesus says that many will be misled by these pretenders to the Messianic throne, but their appearance should come as no surprise to the disciples.

The second sign of the beginning of birth pangs will be "earth shaking" events both in the political and natural realm.

B. "Earth Shaking" Events (13:7-8)

"And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be frightened; those things must take place; but that is not yet the end. For nation will arise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will also be famines. These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.

Jesus tells the disciples that the coming decades will be dominated by fear, constant uprisings and violence, when wars and rumors of wars will dominate the "headlines." Josephus wrote: "[The brigand-like elements]...urged many to revolt, spurring them on toward freedom and threatening with death those who submitted to Roman rule ... Splitting up into armed groups, they ranged over the countryside, killing the powerful rich, plundering their houses, and setting fire to the villages."⁷

These revolutionary movements, coupled with the upsurge of guerrilla activity, kept everyone, especially the ruling classes, in a state of fear. "Men watched their enemies from a distance, and not even approaching friends were trusted."⁸ Together with these political upheavals, Jesus also predicts natural disasters like earthquakes and famine. In the late 40's AD there was a prolonged drought and severe famine. The resulting deteriorating economic situation left poor townships prey to brigand bands of looters.

Such unstable conditions would give rise to tremendous fear, but Jesus tells his disciples they need not fear political upheaval or natural disasters. According to Jesus, these things are just the beginning, not the end. Notice that Jesus is giving precise information so as to alleviate fear. "Do not fear!" he says. These "earth shaking" events are not to shake the faith of the disciples. Rather, like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt, they will be instruments to give birth to the kingdom of God upon earth. What a contrast this is with the teaching of most modern prophesy gurus, who exploit these images to create fear and panic concerning the end!

Now that Jesus has painted a clear picture as to the conditions the disciples will experience following his death and resurrection, he goes on to describe what their exact role will be during that period, and explicitly, the reception they can expect to receive from the world. As we might imagine, it will be the same reaction their master received.

C. Closed Hearts and Open Doors (13:9-13)

1. Official Persecution that Creates Royal Witness

"But be on your guard; for they will deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. And when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit."

Jesus now warns his disciples that the betrayal, trial and persecution he is about to endure will be repeated for them. His way will be their way. Jesus was not spared betrayal, arrest and flogging by the Jewish and Roman authorities, and neither would they. What they were to apprehend by faith was that political persecution and severe suffering would actually become the doorway to worldwide evangelism. Jesus did not seek his own acquittal. Rather, he saw that the sovereign hand of God placed him in the hands of the authorities to give testimony to kings and accomplish redemption for the world. A few short days after Pentecost, Peter and John found themselves in Jesus' shoes, doing exactly as he did (Acts 3-4). The apostle Paul viewed his own trials in the same light. He gave glory to God for each of his imprisonments, knowing these were but holy instruments to bear witness to kings and all who were in authority (Acts 9:15; 1 Tim 2:1-2), as well as encourage free Christians to give bold testimony to Jesus (Phil 1:12-14). Jesus says it would go on that way until these apostles had preached the gospel to the whole known world. And indeed this was the apostolic claim by AD 70 (Mic 3-4; Isa 66:19-20; Rom 15:19; Col 1:6; 1 Tim 3:16).

So Jesus states that the tool for worldwide evangelism, strangely enough, is persecution. He continues with even more paradoxical sayings, declaring that these terrible times of persecution will be the sweetest of times for the souls of the disciples. Their darkest nights will explode into the most glorious dawn, for in that hour the same Holy Spirit who spoke through Jesus at his trial will boldly speak through them before their accusers. Once more he tells them they need not fear the day, or even prepare what they will say. The Spirit will strengthen them and speak through them with the courage of a prophet. Their greatest trial will turn out to be their finest hour. Viewed in this light it is little wonder that the most moving and courageous sermons in Acts were those uttered spontaneously while these men were on trial for their very lives: Peter before the Sanhedrin, Stephen before the elders, Paul before Felix and Agrippa. During this entire period, therefore, the disciples could expect official persecution to be the tool to open doors to worldwide witness.

But that was not all. Times would become even more intense.

2. Universal Betrayal Breeds Steadfast Loyalty

“And brother will deliver brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved.”

Jesus moves from the official, political sphere to the more intimate scenes of home and social community. What can the disciples expect in those arenas? Jesus quotes Micah 7:6, which refers to a total social breakdown in which the most intimate bonds of society are severed, with “brother betraying brother,” and, most painfully, parents and children, rather than nurturing each other, at inconceivable odds, one betraying the other to death, because the gospel provokes such hatred. If these two images were not bad enough, Jesus goes so far as to say that there will be no safe refuge on earth where the apostles will be free from ridicule for the name of Christ. What is he saying but that it is betrayal that governs the world? (2 Cor 11:24-28).

But again, lest the disciples be overcome with dread, Jesus hints that these deplorable conditions of betrayal will have a twofold effect. Betrayal will weed out the unfaithful who infiltrate the ranks of the holy, and will simultaneously forge the strongest bonds of loyalty among the faithful, who will endure until the end. The result will be a steadfast endurance and a loyal-love that stares death in the face. This is what will flood the hearts of these disciples. The love of Christ will so grip their souls (2 Cor 5:14) that they will persevere, absolutely unaffected by what men think. So universal betrayal by men will birth an enduring loyalty to Christ. The account of Stephen's bold yet loving face toward his accusers at his death has always filled me with awe (Acts 7:60).

What a gift Jesus gives to his disciples! He reveals to them the exact conditions they will endure during this entire period, their identity in the midst of it, what their role will be, and the ultimate outcome. In short, he has placed them center-stage on the new horizon of history. It is they, not the current leadership in Jerusalem, who will be the movers and shakers of the new universe. Jesus could hardly have painted the future for the disciples with a broader brush.

For them, these “labor pains” will be the standard operating procedure right up until the time they see what Daniel called “the abomination that makes desolate.” When they see this they are to flee Jerusalem, because a severe tribulation is about to fall on upon the city, immediately followed by the vindication of the Son of Man. We will look at these events next week.

What then are the implications of this text for us today?

III. The Implications of Apostolic Labor

A. A Holy Respect for the Twelve and their Gospel

Reflecting on these verses I feel a deep sense of humility when I contemplate the unique role given by Jesus to the apostles. As the text opened they were overcome with the beauty and permanence of Israel's temple, but then Jesus astounded them by saying that it would be utterly destroyed and a new one built in its place. That birthing process would throw the whole known world into a “severe labor” of turmoil and disaster of every kind. But, just as the ten plagues of Egypt shook all of Pharaoh's world to give birth to Israel, so these worldwide labors would shake every kingdom, especially Jerusalem, to give birth to the church. By the end of that generation, twelve beautiful foundation stones, flawless and perfectly cut, would be permanently laid for the new “living temple.” So the disciples who once were in awe of Herod's temple will find themselves at the center of the new temple.

Notice the meticulous care that goes into laying these precious foundation stones. The apostles' way of life will follow that of Jesus in every detail—arrest, betrayal, death, and resurrection. Thus, once this foundation is laid there will be no question as to the purity of their gospel, nor will there ever be need to lay another foundation. So Paul will write to the Galatians, “But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:8).

We ought to be overcome with humility and awe when

we recall that the scriptures we possess were purchased with the blood of Christ and sealed by the blood of the apostles. The blood of Christ purchased our redemption; the blood of the apostles produced the New Testament. What a sharp contrast with the cults, whose founders have questionable backgrounds and who often gain material profit from their claims. This ought to engender in us great appreciation for the apostles, and put us on our guard against those who would seek to usurp their place. Let us treasure and obey what they preached, remembering that Paul wrote to Timothy, "Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you" (2 Tim 1:14).

B. Realistic Expectations for our Future

Secondly, this text ought to shape our expectations about the future. It seems to me the apostles saw that what God uniquely did with Israel during their generation (30-70 AD) became a microcosm for the larger history of the gospel among the nations. Thus Paul tells Timothy, who was an elder in the church in Ephesus, what he could expect in the "last days" (the period between Pentecost and the Second Coming): "In the last days difficult times will come," said Paul. It will be an age dominated by stress, suffering and betrayal (2 Tim 3:1-13). The apostle universalizes for all believers the persecutions and sufferings that were his own lot, for, he says, "...all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12).

John also wrote that many anti-Christ's had arisen who, in effect, purified the church, weeding out false brethren and at the same time strengthening the loyalty of the faithful (1 Jn 2:18-19). Thus, as Christians we live with realistic expectations for our lives, refusing to be intimidated by the fears that cause panic in the world. Persecution lies ahead, yes, but in Christ we can trust that persecution will serve to strengthen the deepest bonds of loyalty and affection for Christ, for in him we shall endure to the end (2 Tim 2:19). How different this is from the rapturous hope of some who say the church will be taken away! As I read the New Testament I can find no clear text that says Christians will escape suffering, but rather that we shall be preserved through suffering. The whole thrust of the book of Revelation, which was written after 70 AD, declares that in the midst of the tremendous sufferings unleashed on the earth, "blessed is he who endures until the end." Christians can be realistic about the future. We do not need to be tossed and turned by waves of idealism that come with every four-year election period, or plagued by the despair that grips the world in the midst of wars or natural disasters. So this text which gives us a holy awe for our apostolic foundation also gives us realistic expectations about our future.

Finally, it leaves us with hope.

C. Eyes of Faith, Founded in Hope

Just as the apostles saw that their persecution would become the doorway to evangelism, so they exhorted their disciples with the same hope. Rather than thwarting the gospel, persecution and suffering advances the good news. It was Paul himself who said, "My circumstances [of imprisonment] have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (Phil 1:12). Ray Stedman humorously said of this verse: "God appointed the devil to be the head of the committee on world evangelism!" Luke carefully documented several Satanic attacks on the church, yet, after each attack, whether persecution from without or division from within, the church continued to grow (Acts 4:4, 33; 5:14; 6:7; 8:4; 9:31). Acts reads like a divine comedy, or tragedy, depending on whose side you are on. This is why Paul exhorted Timothy to pray for all men, especially those in authority (1 Tim 2:1-2). He knew that he and other Christians while enduring suffering for the gospel would give testimony before kings and rulers. The apostle wanted Christians to be prepared for this and use such opportunities to lead their captors to Christ. Christians who live this way, who have eyes of faith, will live with tremendous hope, undaunted by fear.

Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb 12:28-29)

1. I am especially grateful to Rikki Watts, of Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., for his outline of this material.
2. Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 743.
3. Watts observes: "This was the mountain upon which the Lord was expected to come (Zech 14:3f) and to fight against the nations; but who is now behaving like the nations? Jesus is offering his own stunning exegesis of Zech 14: God's own people have become like the very nations from whom Yahweh was to deliver his people."
4. Taken from his lectures on Mark at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C. See also his book, *Divine Government*.
5. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 498.
6. Taken from Rikki Watts' outline.
7. Richard A. Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs, Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (Harper and Row, 1985) 207.
8. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.256-257.

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THE END OF LABOR

Catalog No. 1138

Mark 13:14-37

37th Message

Brian Morgan

December 5th, 1999

We have reached the holy season of Advent, the time when Christians celebrate our Lord's birth, when we sing wonderful carols like *Joy to the World* and *Silent Night*. But we can easily miss the complex emotions that accompanied the first Advent. We forget that danger, sorrow, flight and death accompanied the joy, birth and new life of the earth-shaking events surrounding the birth of Christ. We rejoice over the one child born in Bethlehem but forget the multitude of little ones massacred there during that same year. Sacred birth took place in the context of deplorable death. The closest I ever came to experiencing these feelings was the time when a close friend went into labor on the same night that her two-year-old son choked to death on an almond. As her son drew his last breath, she delivered a baby girl. For me, November 4th 1976 became a sacred day to remember life and death. Just a month later, we laid our little girl in the grave, and the very next day, December 5th, we heard the marvelous news that we would be able to adopt a baby in two weeks. Sorrow and joy commingled down.

In the thirteenth chapter of Mark's gospel these same emotions are present in the imagery that Jesus uses to describe the establishment of his kingdom on earth. The forty years following his death and resurrection would throw the entire ancient world into severe labor pains. In our last study we examined what we called the beginning of labor. This involved natural disasters, wars and rumors of wars and severe persecution for the disciples. We come now to the end of that labor process, which would climax in the most severe pains in the history of the world. This tribulation would simultaneously bring about two things: the death of the old order and the birth of the new. In this text we will learn that God's most precious gifts come at the greatest price.

I. The Sharp Pain: The Great Tribulation (13:14-23)

A. What to Watch For (13:14)

"But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he should not be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Jesus has already told the disciples that all the things which he referred to in verses 5 through 13 are the "beginning of labor," (birth pangs), but now he identifies the "severe pain" that is a prelude to judgment. When you see that, says Jesus, "flee to the mountains." He is referring to well known expression "*the abomination that makes desolate*," a term that is used four times in the book of Daniel (8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). This image was familiar to the Jews. It evoked painful memories of the time when Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B.C. "erected an altar to Zeus over the altar of burned offering, sacrificed a swine on it, and

made the practice of Judaism a capital offense."¹ With that as background, Jesus tells the disciples that when they see "the abomination of desolation standing where he should not be," (Mark adds, "let the reader understand," i.e., let the one giving the public reading give the interpretation to the congregation), then they were to flee.

Two possibilities exist as to the identity behind this image. The first is the arrival at Jerusalem of the Roman army led by Titus, in 70 A.D. As the army surrounded the city their military standards, bearing the image of an eagle over the imperial bust, an idolatrous image to the Jews, were clearly visible. When they saw this image they would know that Jerusalem was doomed. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that when they saw it, it was already too late; there was no time to flee. It appears to me that the better interpretation is that it was Israel's own abominations, not the arrival of the Roman army, that polluted the land and caused the Lord to depart (Jer 7:10,30, 34).² This is the consistent message of Jeremiah (Jer 4:1-8; 44:22) and Ezekiel (Ezek 5:11-15). When the zealots took over the temple as their headquarters, they carried out a number of extremely disrespectful acts. They interrupted the sacrifices, shed innocent blood, and held a mock installation of their own high priest, Phannias (Jos. Wars IV, 147-57 [iii.6-8]; Ant. 10.11.7).³ Any spiritually sensitive Jew observing this occurring in the holy place would be horrified. Josephus accused: "You are crying out for deliverance because you do not wish the Temple to be desecrated and yet how could they do any worse than what you have already done? You have desecrated the temple!" When they saw this occurring, many Christians evacuated the city as early as 68 A.D. The temple had been defiled. Destruction was imminent.

B. What to Do and Why (13:15-20)

"And let him who is on the housetop not go down, or enter in, to get anything out of his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! But pray that it may not happen in the winter. For those days will be a tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never shall. And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect whom He chose, He shortened the days.

Jesus gives the disciples explicit instructions that once the temple had been defiled, destruction would follow fast and furiously, and everyone was to flee immediately with no second thoughts or diversions. Those sitting on the rooftops, where many spent their time in the cool of the day, were not to go down but rather flee like fugitives from roof to roof to evacuate the city. People in the fields were not to go home to retrieve their cloaks but take the

most direct route out of Jerusalem. Such an evacuation would be especially dreadful for pregnant women and nursing mothers; thus Jesus warns couples who planned on starting families then to reconsider or relocate (Hos 13:16, Josephus *Ant.* 14:13.7-8). Then Jesus tells them to pray that this might not happen in winter, when rain-swollen wadis flooded roads, rendering a quick escape almost impossible. Such an exhortation gives great dignity to prayer, which can move an Almighty God.

The reason for such solemn warnings was that the tribulation which was about to be unleashed upon Jerusalem would be unparalleled in its severity. (By the way, this is a clear indication that this is not the final “tribulation,” since Jesus expected many more to follow.) So severe would it be that the Lord would have to set a limit to its length in order to preserve the elect (Gen 18:22,23; Isa 65:8; Dn 12:1). Many scholars have been disturbed by this saying. How could the tribulation of A.D. 70 compare to the horror of the Holocaust, when six million Jews died in Nazi death camps? How could it compare to the death of twenty million people under Stalin, or the utter destruction of Hiroshima by the atom bomb? The tension can be addressed in one of two ways. Either Jesus was speaking in hyperbole to make his point (Rikk Watts), or, as Carson says, “There have been greater numbers of death, but never so high a percentage of a great city’s population as thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the fall of Jerusalem.”⁴ Both views have merit, but I prefer the former, since Jesus has already used hyperbole in the text (“*not one stone shall be left upon another*”). This was a common way of making an emphatic point in the ancient world.

In any case we should not underestimate the savagery and horror of what was about to come upon Jerusalem (Josephus *Wars* V, 424-38 [x.2-3]). Josephus recorded that there were about three million Jews in the city for Passover. Of those three million, 1.2 million were either killed or enslaved. The greater part of those visiting Jerusalem found themselves shut in by the Roman army. The holy city had become a prison. With all food and water supplies cut off, they endured a fierce famine and raging pestilence. The dead were everywhere: in the upper rooms, along the lanes and in the alleys. There was no place to bury them. Lamentations and groanings filled the night air as looters stripped the dead of their remaining dignity. The silent city became a sealed tomb. Conditions were so severe that many hoped the Romans would break through the walls and put an end to their misery.

The most horrific scene, one that left even the hardest of men reeling, involved that of a young mother killing and roasting her infant son. Josephus wrote that when several starving men smelled the cooking of meat, they rushed upon the woman and demanded to see the food she was hiding. She replied: “This is mine own son, and what has been done was mine own doing! Come, eat of this food; for I have eaten of it myself! Do not you pretend to be either more tender than a woman, or more compassionate than a mother; but if you be so scrupulous, and do abominate this my sacrifice, as I have eaten the one half, let the rest be reserved for me also.” (Josephus, *Wars* 6.3.4) Stabbed with horror, the starving men staggered out, trembling at what they had witnessed. The complete accounts of Josephus, which are too horrific to tell, give weight to Jesus’ terrible words prophesying a tribulation so severe

that had the Lord not shortened those days, no one would have survived. Thus, during this terrible time the disciples could look for God’s sovereign, climactic intervention to bring an end to the trouble.

Next, Jesus adds another warning to guard against further deception.

C. What to Guard Against (13:21-23)

“And then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ’; or, ‘Behold, He is there’; do not believe him; for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order, if possible, to lead the elect astray. But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance.

Jesus declares that during this critical hour many false prophets would arise and use this time of stress as an opportunity to herald their “anointed ones,” promising vain hope of liberation from Rome. As John the Baptist bore witness to Jesus so these imposters would bear witness to their false messiahs. And they would seem to have divine authorization, with signs and wonders backing their claims. But these powers would be demonically inspired to lead even the elect astray, if possible (Deut 13:1-5; Rev 13:13). One such so-called prophet was Simon bar Giora, who entered Jerusalem with 40,000 followers and was greeted as savior and guardian (JB 4.574-8).⁵ Another was Theudas, the prophet “from Egypt.” Once again, the imposter is perennial, but the elect are to remain strong. As Carson says, “Christian faith involves the sober responsibility of neither believing lies nor trusting imposters.”⁶ Though these false messiahs and wonder workers would deceive many, the disciples would be fully prepared because Jesus had told them everything in advance. And by contrast, the appearance and swift departure of the imposters would give more weight to the authority of the apostles and the trustworthiness of their gospel. The same truth abides through the ages. This is why the apostles were careful to teach that the credentials for leaders are not to be determined by signs and wonders, but by holiness of life and purity of doctrine.

In summary, the Lord has told the disciples precisely what to look for (“the abomination that makes desolate”); exactly what to do (“flee Jerusalem”); and what to watch out for during this “severe tribulation” (false Messiahs with false hopes of liberation). Once again we observe how pastoral and practical this material was for the apostles.

Now Jesus describes the climactic event that everything has been leading up to. The end of this severe labor will simultaneously bring about a complete destruction of the old Jerusalem and a new creation of the people of God under the Son of Man.

II. The End and the Beginning (13:24-27)

A. The End of the City (13:24-25)

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken.

At this point we might expect Mark to say, “Then, after that great tribulation, Jerusalem will be destroyed,” but instead, he uses apocalyptic imagery, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars

will be falling from heaven.” Why does he adopt such imagery that on the surface sounds like the end of the world? The reason is that this kind of language was used by Israel’s prophets to describe the “earth-shattering” implications that would accompany the destruction of dominant world forces, whether a ruler as proud as Pharaoh (Ezek 32:7-8), a city as great as Babylon (Is 13:10), or a nation as secure as Edom (Isa 34:4-6; cf. Joel 2:10,31; 3:15). When the prophets described the overthrow of these mighty powers they did so in apocalyptic imagery. The reason, according to Tom Wright, was that these events were so “earth-shattering” that “end-of-the-world language is the only set of metaphors adequate to express the significance of what will happen.”⁷ This is the kind of language we grope for when we are stabbed with inconsolable sorrow and we hunger to invest space-time events with eternal significance. When my newborn son was dying, I remember looking out upon the sun setting over the ocean. The only words large enough to give voice to my soul were, “The sun is going out. My life will never be the same.”

So now that “earth-shattering” language used to describe the complete destruction of Babylon is redirected against Jerusalem, with the same intensity. The powers in the heavens are shaken; a new cosmic order has begun. No longer will Jerusalem and its temple be the spiritual center of the world. Henceforth the center will be Jesus and his new temple, with these twelve disciples as the new foundation stones (Rev 21:14). At Pentecost, Peter used exactly the same imagery to capture the earth-shattering significance the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out upon the disciples would have in the history of the modern world. It was nothing less than a cosmic new creation (Acts 2:20)!

B. The Enthronement of the New King and His People (13:26-27)

“And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

With the final destruction of Jerusalem the disciples would see what Daniel described as the vindication of the Son of Man, enthroned in the heavens. Daniel’s prophecies held great fascination for the Jews as they looked for the coming kingdom. The prophet portrayed Israel’s enemies as wild beasts looming on the horizon: First, a lion, then a bear, then a winged leopard, and then a fourth too terrible to describe (Dan 7:3-8) would rise up out of the sea with ravenous appetites, seeking to devour God’s people. But the terror would be put to rest by a man-like figure who would tame these animals, like a new Adam (Gen 2:19, 20), and set up an eternal kingdom.

**“I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
And to Him was given dominion, glory and a
kingdom,
That all the peoples nations, and men of every
language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed.”**
(Dan 7:13,14)

Amazingly, Jesus adopts this imagery for the destruction of the temple. Israel and her rulers had become like one of the beasts opposing the rule of God. But they had now been overthrown by the Son of Man, who is enthroned in the heavens. Thus, “the coming of the Son of Man” is language that describes Christ’s everlasting rule from heaven, destroying forces opposing his rule. The apostles would use this imagery to include Christ’s final overthrow of evil at the Second Coming (Rev 1:7), but the terminology is broader than its final manifestation. Here we see his vindication manifest in the destruction of the city, an event which Jesus at his trial told the high priest he would see in his lifetime (Mk 14:62).

The next verse follows precisely Daniel’s imagery.

“And then He will send forth the angels (or ‘messengers’), and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth, to the farthest end of heaven.

Not only is the Son of Man firmly established in his rule, but that rule is shared among God’s elect, with people from every nation coming together as one under the rule of the Son of Man. The gathering of the elect represents the fulfillment of Israel’s ancient hope of the gathering of scattered Israel (Deut 30:3; Isa 11:12; 27:12,13; 60:1-9; Zech 2:6). Again, I believe the imagery is more fluid than fixed. The apostles understood it on multiple levels. First, they received a foretaste of it on the day of Pentecost. Next, it would be followed by worldwide evangelization carried out by his “messengers,” who operated under the care of angels, until the final day when the last trumpet call is given by the archangel at the second coming (which scholars refer to as the “rapture”). The point of the imagery in this context is the establishment of not only a new king enthroned in the heavens, but a new people of God, made up of all races and nations, who serve this king, the Son of Man.

So, just as is the case with physical birth, when the death of the old life-support structures of the womb and the placenta occur simultaneously with the birth of new life, now we have the death of old temple and city, followed by the vindication of the Son of the Man and his kingdom.

Jesus concludes his amazing discourse with three words about the timing of that day and the responsibility of the disciples to “watch.”

III. Watching the Timetable (13:28-32)

A. The Day is Imminent (13:28-29)

“Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door.

Jesus ends his discourse now with excellent advice for the disciples about observing the times. First, he says, a careful observer will be able to know with certainty the season. Merely by looking at the tender branches and leaves of the fig tree, every Jew in Israel knew when summer was approaching. So too the disciples would clearly know that when they saw these things the destruction of the city was near: it was right at the door.

Jesus continues:

B. The Time is Bound (13:30-31)

“Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.

Secondly, says Jesus, not only would they know when the season had arrived, they would know its approximate time limit. These things would all take place within this generation (about forty years). So sure is Jesus of this fact he stakes his entire credibility on this statement: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.” Thus, however we interpret the fulfillment of what Jesus has said, we must somehow land “all these things,” not just some of them, as occurring within the lifetime of that generation. This has been a major factor in my interpretation of the text. So the season will be clear and its time limit sure.

But there is something that the disciples would not be able to determine.

C. The Hour is Unknown (13:32)

“But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

Thirdly, though they may know the season, and its outer limits, they would not be able to determine the day. No one knows that, not even the angels or the Son, only the Father. It is the same with childbirth. Every mother knows when her labor is close, and that it is bounded by about 40 weeks, but no doctor can predict the day of delivery.

Jesus explains that there is a very important reason for this mystery.

D. The Need to Watch and to be Responsible (13:33-37)

“Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is. It is like a man, away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Therefore, be on the alert-- for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or in the morning-- lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all, ‘Be on the alert!’”

The reason for their not knowing the exact time is that mystery heightens responsibility. The point cannot be overstated. Three times Jesus repeats his command to be “on the alert.” He was like a man who was leaving on a journey charging his trusted staff with important responsibilities: they were the doorkeepers to the new temple, in charge of all the master’s precious possessions. The very fact that they were unaware of the precise time of his return ensured that he would know who was responsible and who was not. It is a credit to all the apostles that they took these words seriously. They labored wholeheartedly and faithfully throughout their generation. They were not sleeping in 70 A.D. when the destruction came, but were using their gifts to the full as faithful doorkeepers to the new temple.

How should we respond to this text? I find myself strangely gripped with the same conflicting emotions I experienced in December 1976, with sorrow and joy commingled down.

IV. Sorrow and Joy Commingle Down

A. The Crushing Weight of Judgment

First, we find that judgment is the strange work of God. He takes no delight in it, for his delight is salvation. Therefore, he carries out judgment with extreme reluctance. By the time faithless Israel fell under its curse, most of its inhabitants were in their 70’s or 80’s. They were given up to their very final days to repent. But sadly, most did not do so, and when judgment came it arrived with a severe finality. I believe Jesus emphasized the severity of this tribulation because he wanted every generation to feel the weight of their choices as exemplary of what lay in store for those who refused the gospel. Being in hell will be like being held captive in a city under siege, shut up in a sealed tomb inside a community that devours one another -- surrounded by people, yet totally alone.

Because we are made in the image of God we have tremendous dignity. Our choices count. This is more dignity than we want at times. But God will not remove it, and if we resist him for a lifetime, our choices will seal us in hell forever. And so this event of the great tribulation becomes typological of the final judgment:

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.” (2 Pet 3:10)

B. The Grandeur of the New Creation

If we are a bit reluctant to feel the weight of judgment, perhaps we are bit shy at entering into the grandeur of this new creation. Once again, the use of apocalyptic imagery to describe this new birth means that the significance of these historical events is incalculable. The new creation so outshines the old it cannot be measured in space-time language. It is nothing less than a new creation. Do we really believe that? Does the installation of the Son of Man on his heavenly throne, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the completion of the New Testament and the establishment of the new temple, his church, really change the structure of the universe? Jesus says it does. And I believe him (Heb 12:18-24). Amen.

1. D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 500.
2. This is Rikk Watts’ position from his outline on this material from Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.
3. Special thanks to Bob London for his help and research on the Josephus material for this text.
4. Carson, 501.
5. Quoted by Watts.
6. Carson, 503.
7. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 208.

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DYING DEVOTION

Catalog No. 1139

Mark 14:1-11

38th Message

Brian Morgan

May 7th, 2000

This morning and over the next few Sundays we will examine the climax of the greatest story ever told, the passion of our Lord Jesus from the gospel of Mark. On Easter week, pilgrims from all over the world visit Israel in an effort to experience the drama of that event by retracing Jesus' steps on the Via Dolorosa (Way of Sorrows), which winds its way from Pilate's Court to Golgotha, the place where Jesus was crucified.

Rummaging through some old color slides recently of my first trip to Israel, I found a photograph of one of our more enthusiastic elders, caught in a full sprint on the Via Dolorosa. I titled it, "Here's John running where Jesus walked!" That snapshot is typical of our age. We are so eager to experience everything in so brief a span that our rapid pace results in our truly experiencing very little. Our new technologies are designed to help connect us with everyone but they actually render it even more difficult to really make contact with anyone, free from outside distraction.

But the need for connection has never been more vital. Mark can greatly assist us at this critical hour. When we come to the holiest ground in his gospel, instead of speeding up the pace he slows it down to a virtual standstill.¹ And instead of forcing us to connect with scores of individuals he invites us to connect with but a few, and even some of those are anonymous. Ultimately, as time seems to stand still we will be left with just one person, the Lord Jesus. When that time comes, we will learn what it means to worship the one who gave his life for us.

Our story begins on the Wednesday of Passion Week. Earlier, on Sunday, Jesus had made his triumphal entry into the city. On Monday, he cursed the fig tree and cleansed the temple. On Tuesday, he delivered the Olivet Discourse, in which he outlined the complete destruction of the temple and the city. One could hardly think of actions or words more confrontational.² Thus it is hardly surprising that his actions provoked the anger of Israel's leaders, leading to his eventual death.

I. Deceptive Plotting (14:1-2)

Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread was two days off; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth, and kill Him; for they were saying, "Not during the festival, lest there be a riot of the people." (NASB)

It is just two days prior to Passover, and all Israel is gathered to commemorate the Exodus. Jerusalem is bustling with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims. At this

most holy time, as the nation is celebrating their miraculous deliverance from slavery, her religious leaders are plotting deception and death. They want use the feast as a cover to kill Jesus. But Jesus' popularity and the presence of such huge crowds pose a threat to their timing. Fearing that a riot will break out if they take immediate action, they deliberate about waiting until after the festival, when everyone will have left for home. By the end of the scene, however, Judas' proposal alleviates all their concerns, and they throw caution to the winds.

While Israel's leaders are plotting Jesus' execution, he is in the midst of an intimate fellowship meal at a home in Bethany.

II. Fragrant Devotion (14:3-9)

A. What a Waste!

And while He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; she broke the vial and poured it over His head. But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted? For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and given to the poor." And they were scolding her. (14:3-5)

Jesus seeks lodging out of sight of Jerusalem proper, in Bethany, a village just over the hill from the city. There he finds refuge in the home of "Simon the leper." Jesus had probably cured the man; if not, all present were violating the Mosaic Law. Just as they begin to recline at a fellowship meal, perhaps given in appreciation to Jesus to celebrate his healing of the leper, an unnamed woman enters the home, carrying an alabaster vial of costly perfume. John identifies the woman as Mary (John 12:3), the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

For his own purposes, Mark keeps the woman's identity anonymous. This has the effect of making her actions an icon of devotion. The perfume, perhaps derived from the nard plant that is native to India, was very expensive. R. T. France suggests, "The single flask of ointment that could have been sold for nearly a year's wages must surely have been a family heirloom."³ The woman walks right up behind Jesus, breaks the neck of the flask, and pours out the entire contents on his head. What an extravagant act of devotion! No king in Israel had been anointed like this since the days of Jehu (2 Kgs 9:6).

Gundry suggests that she did not need to break the flask: “she needed only to remove the stopper or untie the piece of cloth that covered the mouth of the flask. Breaking the flask dramatized the outpouring of all the contents by making the flask henceforth unusable.”⁴ As the contents of the broken flask spill out over the head of Jesus, the fragrance fills the house. Thus, into that festive atmosphere floats the fragrance of costly, whole-hearted devotion.

The woman’s actions leave some of Simon’s dinner guests aghast, however. Mark doesn’t say who they were, but Matthew identifies them as the disciples (26:8), while John further specifies that it was Judas Iscariot (12:4-5). As the treasurer of the group, he probably protested the loudest. “What a waste!” they exclaim. During festival time there were probably thousands of poor within just a few miles of Jerusalem. It was customary for the Jews to give gifts to them on the evening of the Passover. Thousands could probably have been fed for some time with the proceeds from what had just been “wasted” on Jesus. So overcome are some of the disciples with the irresponsibility of the woman’s action, their indignation (the verb means, “to express violent displeasure”) gives way to open rebuke, and the unnamed woman is subjected to a lengthy tirade of humiliation and censor.

Here we come to the turning point of the scene as Jesus enters into the fray. He forcefully defends Mary’s actions, rebuking those who are censoring her.

B. What Value and Eternal Significance!

But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For the poor you always have with you, and whenever you wish, you can do them good; but you do not always have Me. She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, that also which this woman has done shall be spoken of in memory of her.” (14:6-9)

Jesus rebukes her critics, on two counts. First, they had no sense of divine priorities. The issue was not a question of neglecting service to the poor, for Jesus often spoke of caring for the poor, and earlier had asked the rich young ruler to give up all that he owned to give to the poor (France). So why does he not join in and condemn the unnamed woman’s actions? His answer suggests that is always appropriate to give to the poor, for their cause is enduring, but this was a once in a lifetime moment of devotion, when spontaneous extravagance was more than appropriate, much as a groom’s one-time investment when he purchases a wedding ring for his bride. R.T. France suggests, “There is room in the kingdom of God both for the careful stewardship of resources for the sake of those in need, and on occasion, for spontaneous and uncalculating devotion. True discipleship embraces not only scrupulous accountancy but also reckless exuberance. There is a time to gath-

er...and a time to throw away” (Eccl 3:5-6).⁵

Flo Yoshida was our Scripture reader this morning. I had the privilege of ministering at her 96 year-old father’s funeral last week. James Imahara was a diminutive man, but he lived a very full life. Because he was of Japanese descent he was placed in an internment camp during World War II. He lost most of his possessions, yet he still able care for all of his ten children, his grandchildren and sixteen great grandchildren. At his passing, fifty of the Imahara clan traveled from nine states to attend his funeral. Someone might ask, why not take all of the money expended to bring this family together for a funeral and give it to the poor? But this was a once in a lifetime event. The family listened as his grandchildren sang “The Old Rugged Cross.” They saw their grandfather on videotape, at 96, singing “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know,” in Japanese. They heard a daughter tell her parents how much she loved them, because they had spent the last ten years of their life caring for her grandfather. They heard the passion of two sons who could hardly speak of their father so great was the emotion of the moment. They saw 96 roses on the open casket. Such an hour calls for extravagant worship. “There is a time to gather...and a time to throw away” (Eccl 3:5-6).

Jesus has more to say to the cost-conscious disciples. It was not just a question of proper priorities; they lacked spiritual sensitivity as to what was going on in this divine hour. The woman’s expression of devotion had deep symbolic value. Though not even she may have perceived the full significance of the hour, her actions had introduced a holy dimension, something that was larger than life, into this ordinary home. And she was able to do it within her means: “she has done what she could.” Israel’s long-awaited messianic king would soon to be delivered over to a hasty death. His body would not receive the normal care and proper treatment for burial. Behind the woman’s devotion Jesus saw the divine hand of love anointing him for his burial. As she allowed the impulses of her heart to have full expression, her devotion filled the room with a beautiful fragrance that symbolically anticipated the fragrance of Christ’s holy death, a death that would bring salvation to the whole world, a salvation greater than the Exodus: He would make the poor to be rich. Realizing that, the gift of pure nard worth a year’s wage paled by comparison. But, as Jesus said, “she has done what she could.”

*When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

...

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

In light of what was taking place in that home, the

woman's devotion was entirely appropriate. So appropriate was it to the divine moment, it not only anticipated the future, it would be eternally remembered. Jesus said that what she had done would be permanently recorded in sacred history for every generation, wherever the gospel is preached, as an icon of true worship. What Jesus said of her on that evening is being fulfilled in our hearing this day. Remembering her we are stirred by her devotion.

But lest we become too caught up in this holy moment, Mark thrusts us ahead into the horror of betrayal.

III. Betrayal for Money (14:10-11)

And Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests, in order to betray Him to them. And they were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time. (14:10-11)

In the first scene, Jesus spoke about the opportune time for devotion. Here, his enemies are seeking an opportunity for betrayal and death. The leader of the pack is the same one who earlier had rebuked Mary for "wasting" expensive perfume on Jesus. This one, an intimate disciple, will betray Jesus to the chief priests. The offer brings gladness to those in authority, and the deal is sealed with a handsome honorarium.

How horrifying, to see holy devotion bracketed by hate on the one hand and betrayal on the other! Money, devotion and opportunity link the three scenes. In one case, a year's wages is poured out over the head of Jesus in a supreme act of devotion, and Jesus applauds it as a once in a lifetime opportunity. In the second, those who are devoted to themselves will waste a holy life in order to get rich. In the first case, the act of devotion is objected to on behalf of the poor; in the second, the poor are not even mentioned.

The story leaves us with but one question, How do we worship? Three expressions are listed here: those of Jesus' enemies, his disciples, and the unnamed woman.

IV. How do we Worship?

A. Self Devotion

Sadly, Jesus' enemies miss everything that is true about worship. Blinded by the paranoia of losing control, they miss the holiness of Israel's memory in Passover and the yet greater Passover about to be enacted. They refuse to yield control to the new king, and yet they are surprisingly successful in their deceptive ploy. The irony is that at the very pinnacle of their freedom they will be mere pawns on the chessboard of the kingdom of God, unwilling instruments to a higher end, one of cosmic proportions, but they will never benefit from that which those ends will achieve.

Does this scenario describe your life? You may attend all the holy feasts, but you have never given over control of your life to Israel's king. You may be successful

in all your exploits, but in the end, you will be a pawn, never benefiting from what God overrules in your life. That kind of worship is given no word of correction, only stark silence. This is the silent consequence of being given over to what you've already predetermined in your heart. It even paves the way to make you successful in your deception and idolatry, so that when your demise comes, it will become a public testimony to all—a shattered icon of self-devotion, like Judas' thirty pieces of silver.

B. Devotion that is Cold and Calculated

The disciples, on the other hand, represent a kind of worship that appears responsible, but underneath is cold and calculating. Devoid of love and emotion, worship can be reduced to responsible duty. We may tithe, and care for the poor with a self-imposed rigor, but we are behaving like dish-rag accountants, lacking spiritual sensitivity. There is about as much devotion in that kind of act as there is in writing a monthly alimony check. That kind of cold worship is challenged and rebuked, just as Cain was rebuked by God for offering his Creator a calculated tip instead of the best of what he had, the first-fruits. Cain did not repent, and his decision led to an agonizing exile. Judas did not repent, and his led to a horrifying suicide.

C. Dying Devotion

In contrast to these two is the woman, Mary. The one who earlier had sat at the feet of Jesus and was rebuked by her sister Martha for her lack of service is now driven by spontaneous internal impulses to give the best gift that she had. Her devotion was extravagant, even extraordinary by human terms, but appropriate, perhaps even modest, in divine terms: "she has done what she could." By following the impulses of her enraptured heart she infused an ordinary home with an enduring holiness that was larger than life. Simon invited Jesus to a supper of appreciation. He had no idea that at this meal he would smell the fragrance that would bring salvation to the ends of the earth for all time.

Just once in your life, ask the Lord to allow this to happen to you. Be keenly aware when people are entering into the sufferings of Christ, and allow your heart to be drawn into devotion. Seize the opportunity. Perhaps you will give an offering whose scent will fill the house and you will turn a home into a temple of worship. You may be rebuked for irresponsibility but, on the other hand, it could be said of you, "you just did what you could."

Those are the three expressions of worship which Mark sets in stark contrast, one with another. Let us pray that we will be like the woman.

But there is one more thing we ought not neglect in this text. What was it that Jesus learned in this incident?

D. The View of Jesus

Jesus was the recipient of all three expressions of worship. Thus, we discover from his point of view that the holiest expressions of love are given birth in the womb of hate. The two go hand in hand. Love does not grow in a vacuum of niceties. And so it may be true for us that those whom we invest most in may bring us great sorrow, while the unexpected outsider may surprise us with consummate joy. And we, like Jesus, must anchor our hope in the absolute sovereignty of God, whose constant practice it is to work out his highest good in the midst of the most depraved evil. And that is a God who is worthy of our devotion. Amen.

1. Stephen Smith has an interesting discussion on this in his book: "Mark begins his narrative at breakneck speed, and ends it at a virtual standstill." *A Lion with Wings: A Narrative-Critical Approach to Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 143.

2. "To evoke, even conditionally, the destruction of 'this temple' was to touch not just stone and gold and not only the general well-being but history and hope, national identity, self-understanding and pride." (Meyer) N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 425.

3. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Doubleday, 1998) 176.

4. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 813

5. France, 176-177.

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THE FINAL PASSOVER

Catalog No. 1140
 Mark 14:12-31
 39th Message
 Brian Morgan
 May 14th, 2000

Many among us will celebrate the gift of motherhood over a meal on this Mother's Day. Families tend to experience their most intimate times during meals, especially festive occasions. This is why the theme of feeding and eating is so prominent in the gospels. Indeed, the Lord Jesus and the disciples shared their most intimate moments over meals.

In our studies in the gospel of Mark we come now to the most intimate meal that has ever been shared, an occasion that is recorded in all four of the gospels. So significant is this meal it is to be participated in by every Christian, in every age and on all occasions, in anticipation of the great Messianic banquet (Is. 25:6-9) at the climax of history. So today our Lord humbly requests your presence at a meal to be held in his honor. The occasion is Israel's final Passover, the supper of the Lamb.

Our text has three divisions. First, the preparations for the meal (Mk. 14:12-16); second, the actual meal, which was held in the upper room (14:17-26); and finally, the writer has us view the significance of the meal, from the top of the Mount of Olives (14:27-31).

I. Preparations for the Passover (14:12-16)

And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" And he sent two of his disciples, and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him; and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is my guest room in which I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"' And he himself will show you a large upper room furnished and prepared; and prepare for us there." And the disciples went out, and came to the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover. (Mk 14:12-16, NASB)

Mark introduces the scene by indicating that the occasion was the first day of Unleavened Bread. (The entire eight-day celebration, including Passover, was sometimes referred to as the Feast of Unleavened Bread.) "There was no time to lose because the Passover meal had to be eaten within the walls of the city (Cf. M. *Pesachim* 7.9) between sundown and midnight, the first hours of the 5th of Nisan."¹ The disciples inquired of Jesus as to where he would like them to make preparations² to celebrate the feast. This was no small task.

They had to find a hospitable home in hostile Jerusalem (and thereby placing the homeowner in jeopardy), and it had to be large enough to accommodate thirteen dinner guests. Then they had to purchase all the groceries—unleavened bread, bitter herbs, wine, a special sauce and, most importantly, the lamb.

Jesus' answer to their question piqued their curiosity. The home had already been prearranged; all they had to do was go there and carefully follow instructions. They were to travel directly from Bethany into the city; there they would be greeted by an anonymous man who would secretly take them to a guest room that had already been prepared. The sign that would mark this man out from the crowd was rather odd: he would be carrying a pitcher of water. In the ancient world, women normally performed this task, most often, slave women who would wash the feet of guests before they entered the home as a sign of welcome. So the disciples were commanded to find that man who was taking on the role of a female slave, and follow him to the hospitable home in Jerusalem. There they would learn the mystery of how kings become slaves and slaves become kings.

Arriving at the home, should announce that they had the authority of the teacher who sent them: "The Teacher says, 'Where is my guest room?'" The power of those words would set everything in motion. "Jewish custom required that if a person had a room available, he must give to any pilgrim who asked to stay in it, in order that he might have a place to celebrate the Passover."³ The owner would take them to a large upper room that had already been readied for them. There they would prepare their provisions for the final Passover and await the arrival of Jesus.

The two unnamed disciples followed Jesus' directions, and when they arrived at the home they found everything to be just as he had said. Someone else who was unknown to them had already made preparations for the intimate meal. Some scholars speculate that the owner of the home was John Mark's father, but Mark preserves his anonymity, as he does that of the mysterious man. This has the effect of drawing us into the story, inviting us to play their roles.

II. The Passover Meal (14:17-26)

A. Announcement of Betrayal (14:17-21)

And when it was evening he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at the table and eating,

Jesus said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.” They began to be grieved and to say to him one by one, “Surely not I?” And he said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who dips with me in the bowl. For the Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.”

In the evening, when dusk had given way to darkness and the night air had grown cold, Jesus arrived with the twelve. The dinner proceeded normally until, out of the blue, Jesus suddenly said, “...one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.” This would be like announcing at a dinner attended by a number of married couples that one of the husbands present was about to embark on an adulterous affair. But this betrayal in the upper room was even worse. “To betray a friend after eating a meal with him was, and still is, regarded as the worst kind of treachery in the Middle East.”⁴ This would be akin to a pastor announcing at a wedding ceremony that the groom would commit adultery on his honeymoon, just hours after he had spoken his wedding vows and placed the first bite of the wedding cake in his bride’s mouth. How did Jesus know what was about to happen? It is because he had studied David’s Psalms (Psa 41:9). He knew that David’s story would become his story as the greater David.

The disciples were “grieved.” They were absolutely horrified. How ironic! They had yet to show grief over the many announcements of Jesus’ death, but now they were grieved, because they feared they might be implicated. Overcome with the enormity of Jesus’ charge, they responded uniformly, one after another, “Surely not I.” But Jesus emphatically pressed the point home, saying, “One of the twelve, one who dips with me in the bowl.” Carson suggests that the bowl was most likely the one containing the “herbs and a fruit puree, which was scooped out with bread” to be eaten with the lamb. This did not narrow the circle, but it heightened the enormity of the betrayal. Jesus said that he and his betrayer had shared a common dish.

How could Jesus be so calm in the midst of such treachery? And why would he allow Judas to play out all his evil cards unhindered? He knew that he was “acting out the drama into which he has been cast in the central role, but within the drama Judas and the other actors are the responsible causes of events.”⁶ Thus, free will, sprung by evil intentions, was allowed play itself out fully, while the secret, divine hand directed all toward that great end. Jesus remained calm in the midst of betrayal and death, for all had been divinely predetermined (see Isa 53:7-9; Dan 9:26). Yet those who had caused what was about to happen would be held absolutely responsible. Carson puts it succinctly: “The divine necessity for the Sacrifice of the Son of Man, grounded in the Word of God, does not excuse or mitigate the crime of betrayal. Divine sovereignty and hu-

man responsibility are both involved in Judas’s treason, the one effecting salvation and bringing redemption history to its fulfillment, the other answering the promptings of an evil heart.”⁷

Jesus’ bold announcement of betrayal renders the scene that follows dense with emotion, and his sparse words all the more significant.

B. The New Covenant Meal: The Bread and the Cup (14:22-26)

And while they were eating, he took some bread, and after blessing it he broke it; and gave it to them, and said, “Take it; this is my body.” And when he had taken a cup, and given thanks, he gave it to them; and they all drank from it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I say to you, I shall never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” And after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

During dinner, Jesus took some of the unleavened bread and gave the traditional Hebrew blessing: “*Blessed art Thou, O Lord, King of the Universe, who causes bread to come forth from the earth.*” After the blessing it was customary for the host “to retell the story of the Exodus, interpreting the actions and the elements of the meal in terms of that story, thereby linking the present company with the children of Israel as they left Egypt...According to the Mishnah, the unleavened bread of Passover was explained by Gamaliel (a contemporary of Jesus) as signifying the redemption from Egypt.”⁸ On this occasion, as Jesus took on that role, he gave the story new meaning, saying that the bread was his body, and the breaking of it in death would be the source of life for his disciples. From this day forward, wherever his disciples lived they could experience his real presence whenever they celebrated this Supper.

Then Jesus took the cup (probably the third cup of four taken during the Passover meal, drank after the meal was eaten), and spoke the traditional Hebrew blessing: “*Blessed art Thou, O Lord, King of the Universe, who brings forth fruit from the vine.*” When they had drank from the cup, Jesus explained its new significance. This was the blood of the covenant which was poured out for many (Exod 24:8; Isa 53:12). With those few words (eleven, in Greek) Jesus announced what the prophets long ago had only dreamt about. Jeremiah and Ezekiel said that a day was coming when God would permanently forgive Israel’s sins and establish a new covenant by writing his laws on her heart (Jer 31:31-33; Ezek 36:24-27).

Jesus concluded with an amazing second statement, one that was as emphatic as the first: “Truly I say to you, I shall never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

When Jesus drank the cup he was declaring that this was Israel's final Passover. No longer would there be need to look ahead to a new Exodus, for the new age had dawned in his suffering and vindication.⁹ What an epoch-making pronouncement! Imagine you were living in East Berlin prior to 1989, and in the fall of that year you were invited to a ceremonial meal attended by a corps of elite NATO commandos. During dinner it was announced that these select few were going to sacrifice their lives to demolish the Berlin Wall. The Iron Curtain would be no more! Their death would result in your freedom! A new era in history was about to dawn!

In like manner, Jesus said that this cup was the final drink before the inauguration of the kingdom of God on earth. The next time he drank it would be at the feast of the new, redeemed community. So, just as the Passover looked back to Israel's Exodus, and ahead to the new Exodus (her return from exile), so also the Lord's supper looked back to the death of Christ and ahead to the Messianic banquet of all nations at the end of the age (Isa 25:6; 1 Enoch 72:14; Matt 8:11; Luke 22:29-30). The disciples, shell-shocked from Jesus' earlier announcement of betrayal, were left with little capacity to take in the significance of his words. Only later, after the resurrection, as they relived the memory over and over again, the full implications of what Jesus had done came into focus.

Following the cup, they concluded their dinner by singing the second half of the *Hallel* hymns, Psalms 115-118 (Pss 113 and 114 probably preceded the meal). Imagine the impact these verses had on our Lord as he sang,

**The LORD is my strength and my song;
And He has become my salvation.
Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the
righteous:
The LORD's right hand has done mighty things!
The LORD's right hand is lifted high;
The LORD's right hand has done mighty things!
I will not die but live,
And will proclaim what the LORD has done.
The LORD has disciplined me severely
But He has not given me over to death.
(Psa 118:14-18)**

Millions of pilgrims had sung Israel's salvation songs for over a thousand years, but now the One for whom the psalms were written had arrived. What emotions do you think Jesus felt, knowing he would not be spared from death, but through death? Then, following the resurrection, he would return to the people of God with resounding praise, "The Lord's right hand has done mighty things!" No words are adequate to describe his emotions.

After they had sung the hymns, Jesus led his disciples from the upper room, ascending high above the city to the Mount of Olives. From that vantage point he gave them a vision of things to come.

III. The View from the Mountain (14:27-31)

A. The Announcement of Denial (14:27-28)

And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, because it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee."

It is astonishing to think that Jesus kept the disciples abreast of not only every detail of what was about to happen, but its significance and how it would affect them. He had led them through his betrayal and death, and now he tells them of the impact which his death will have upon them. Literally, he said it would scandalize them. As they watched their king being seized, and then tried and crucified, they would be gripped with terror and every last one of them would run away. This was foretold in Zechariah,¹⁰ the same prophet who spoke about Jesus' royal entry into the city on a foal of a donkey (9:9). But after the death of the Shepherd there would be a glorious resurrection and a reunion of both Shepherd and sheep, in Galilee. This clearly shows that the stability of the kingdom of God is based on the bedrock sovereign rule of God, not the fickle resolve of men. At the very instant when Jesus' disciples sided with unbelieving Israel, God was at work, making them the true people of God. And notice where that would occur—not in Jerusalem but in Galilee. That was where he would begin the creation of his new temple!

The prediction of the disciples' imminent disloyalty provoked a powerful rebuttal from Peter.

B. Peter's Denial (14:29-31)

But Peter said to him, "Even though all may fall away, yet I will not." And Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, that you yourself this very night, before a cock crows twice, shall three times deny me." But he kept saying insistently, "If I have to die with you, I will not deny you!" And they all were saying the same thing, too.

Peter was adamant: all might fall away, but he was made of different stuff. Jesus responded to his boast with an even more emphatic and painful revelation: "Truly I say to you, you yourself, this very night, before a cock crows twice...shall three time deny me." "Apparently it was usual for roosters in Palestine to crow at 12:30, 1:30 and 2:30 am.; so the Romans gave the term 'cock-crow' to the watch from 12:00 to 3:00 am."¹¹ The denial was not only certain, it was imminent. Within hours Peter would disown the Lord, not just once, but thrice, despite the double warning of the rooster. The cock's crow strikes the imagination as an appropriate symbol of one who was strutting about in arrogance but would soon be beheaded and served up on a platter.

Sadly, not even this direct confrontation penetrated Peter's heart. He was the master of denial. "The language of Peter's protest suggests that he does not really think that Jesus' death is likely; and even if it were, he still has visions of heroism."¹² As he reasserted his bold

vows, everyone else joined in as well. The “all” who would be scandalized and scattered now “all” say the same thing, too. Jesus refused to confront this denial with another word. The only appropriate rod of correction left was the painful silence of consequence.

What then shall we make of the events of the upper room and this final Passover? Few texts in scripture capture our Lord’s longing to have intimate fellowship with us. Every aspect of this text cries out for intimacy.

IV. Will You Join Him in the Supper of the Lamb?

The first sign of Jesus’ longing for intimacy is indicated by all the prearranged details. Jesus has arranged everything. All we have to do is come. Such thoughtful care, crafted down to the last detail, endows us with a sense of privilege as honored guests. Everything is waiting for us. All we have to do is arrive in obedience. For much of my life I have felt a sense of wonder at this. From my early teens to the present I have lived with that sense that I am traveling on a highway where things are pre-arranged before I arrive. I merely show up in obedience and sit down to a meal I had nothing to do with.

Secondly, once we are drawn into that secluded place it becomes even more intimate. Jesus is going to tell us beforehand everything about his destiny. How does he know everything? you ask. The answer is, because he knew the Scriptures, and he was the only Jew who could bring all of this to pass. He knew how Psalm 41 foreshadowed Judas, and how the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (Isaiah 53) fit together with the glorious Son of Man in Daniel 7. He had read all of the imagery of shepherd, sheep, and city in Zechariah and saw it all coalescing in this one moment. And, with even more genius, he collapsed it all into two symbols, the bread and the cup. Then we become the privileged guests to hear the most intimate details of his agony. How ironic this is! Usually, we see ourselves as unloading our burdens on God, but here at this table the Son of Man wants us to enter into his agony. Every detail is told beforehand: betrayal, death, denial, and resurrection. One sits at that table for whom all of history has waited, and he wants us to enter into that moment with him.

Thirdly, not only do we learn everything about Jesus’ destiny, we discover that he knows everything about us. He knows that his sufferings are of such magnitude that we cannot comprehend them. He knows that we are more moved by our own failure than his death. He knows that our holy vows of loyalty are but dust in the wind. He knows that a mere few hours after attending church we will probably lack the courage to proclaim his name. He knows all that and yet he still wants to eat with us. It is because he loves us.

Finally, we learn that his commitment to us is much deeper than our own gut determination. He knows that at the height of our failure, when we learn what he already knows about us, it is then that we will be swept up by the wind of his resurrection and be qualified to carry the real presence of him everywhere. For, as often as we drink this cup and eat this bread we celebrate his death until he comes. At this hour, he has signed his whole estate over to us. The future is completely ours. Come, O come to the supper of the Lamb. Amen.

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1. Walter W. Weasel, “Mark,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 758.
2. The word “*prepare*” is the key word of this scene, used four times (14:12, 15 [2x], 16).
3. Wessel, 758.
4. Wessel, 759.
5. D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 534.
6. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 203.
7. Carson, 534.
8. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 561.
9. “Within several Jewish retellings of Israel’s story, the great themes of exile and restoration and of the kingdoms of god and the kingdoms of the world, would reach their climax in a great moment of suffering and vindication. The night would get darker and darker, and then the dawn would come. Israel’s tribulations would reach their height, and then redemption would arrive. Daniel would face the lions, and then be exalted...The son of man would suffer at the hands of the beasts, and then be lifted up to the right hand of the Ancient of Days.” Wright, 465.
10. “Jesus in short, was constantly telling a particular story, in which the true king of Israel arrives to search for his wayward sheep. This is one sharply focused point of the kingdom-message, in which Israel is to be restored at last after suffering exile at the hands of pagans and misrule from her own leaders.” Wright, op. cit., pg. 534.
11. Hans Kosmala, “The Time of the Cock-Crow,” *Annual of Swedish Theological Institute 2* (1963) 118-20; 6 (1967-68) 132-34; quoted by Carson, 542.
12. Carson, 542.



THE DARKEST NIGHT

Catalog No. 1141
 Mark 14:32-42
 40th Message
 Brian Morgan
 May 21st, 2000

A difficult question, and one that I am frequently asked, is, If God is all sovereign and he has predestined everything in life, why bother to pray, since it won't change anything? Sometimes it is skeptics who ask that question, but on occasion it is put by believers in critical situations where there seems no way out, when they face a crippling illness or the death of a loved one.

I have keenly felt some of these tensions. Why do we pray? When our first-born son became ill, a group of friends held an all-night prayer meeting. They prayed, and the boy died. Prior to the birth of our last daughter, a group of forty-eight college students spent twenty-hours praying for her good health, each taking a one half-hour segment of the day. They prayed, and Katie lived. How can we explain this? Confronted by these divine mysteries, I find I am comforted more by stories than by concepts.

In our study in Mark's gospel this morning we will see our Lord in the posture of prayer, wrestling face down in the dust with the same issues. It is the evening of Passover. Jesus has just established the first new covenant meal in the upper room, and he and his disciples have descended down the Kidron valley and entered the garden of Gethsemane. It will be a dark night. In the agony that follows we must never forget that this story is for us, for it not only secured our redemption, but also, "the way of Gethsemane" will in some respects become the "way" for every Christian disciple.

I. Deep Within the Garden of Gethsemane

Mark 14:32-42

And they came to a place named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here until I have prayed." And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled. And He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch." And He went a little beyond them, and was falling to the ground, and began to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by. And He was saying, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will." And He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Keep watching and praying, that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again He went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again He came and found

them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him. And He came the third time, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!" (Mark 14:32-42, NASB)

The name "Gethsemane" is derived from the Hebrew term "*gat shemani*," meaning "press of oils." The garden, located on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, was planted with groves of olive trees and had numerous olive presses. John records that this was one of Jesus' favorite spots. This was where he liked to withdraw with his disciples (John 18:2). The site is well preserved even today. Actually, a number of olive trees in the grove that are still productive date back to Jesus' day. A thousand years before Christ, King David found himself in Gethsemane. He had left the upper city in forced exile (having just been betrayed by his own son) and descended down the steep slope to cross the brook Kidron. In that dark hour, when David publicly exposed his own humiliation, he was embraced in one of the most beautiful acts of loyalty recorded in Scripture (2 Sam 15:19ff). A thousand years later, Israel's greater David longed for the same acts of loyalty as he was overcome with the prospect of imminent humiliation.

As Jesus entered the garden he left eight of his disciples at the entrance, instructing them to remain there until he had prayed. Then, taking Peter, James and John, the three closest to him, he entered into the deepest recesses of the terrible sanctity of that hour. No longer could he mask his anguish with stern self-control. Overcome with dismay and terror, he confided in the three, hoping to draw strength and comfort from them.

It is difficult to find words to describe what happened to Jesus on this occasion, but Mark reaches for two verbs that are very rare in the New Testament and combines them in the hope that the reader might begin to comprehend the extreme emotions overtaking Jesus at this hour. He records that Jesus was "very distressed and troubled." The first term speaks of being completely overwhelmed with amazement. Our Lord had never experienced anything like this before. The second speaks of extreme distress, which the other gospel writers say pressed in on him so hard that he sweat huge drops of sweat, like blood. One scholar wrote that the two terms "describe an extremely acute emotion, a compound of bewilderment, fear, uncertainty and anxiety,

nowhere else portrayed in such vivid terms as here.”¹ As Jesus drowns in this sea of darkness (perhaps the Greek preposition *peri* attached to the verb suggests the darkness completely surrounded him), the only words he can voice to describe the terror is that he thinks the weight of grief may kill him. This is the anguished echo of the refrain in Psalms 42-43 (cf. Isa 38:1):

“Why are you in despair, O my soul?

And why have you become disturbed within me?”
(Psa 42:5, 11; 43:5)

Drawing on the support of his three closest friends, Jesus asks them to stay close by, within earshot, and remain alert so that they can keep watch for him while he prays undistracted. What an awesome privilege! Wouldn't you have been breathless at the prospect of hearing his every word? The problem for the three disciples, however, was that they had just consumed a large feast, and it was near midnight. Their full stomachs, dull minds and weary bodies would be no match for the dark forces in the air on this night.

As Jesus leaves them there, the weight of the oppression is so great that he cannot walk, and he falls to the ground repeatedly.² Isaiah's words, “crushed for our iniquities” (53:5), appear painfully appropriate. What a pitiful sight: this man who had stood upright his whole life, continually extending his hands to lift others from the trash heap, is without strength to stand at this, the very vortex of evil. The only posture available to him for prayer is face down on the ground.

But from that position he makes his voice heard in heaven. Mark first gives a summary of his request, and then follows with our Lord's exact words. The bottom line is, if there is any way out, Jesus wants out. Does that surprise you? All his life he had obeyed his heavenly Father. The word No had never entered his vocabulary. But not this night. He wanted to be spared from this terrible hour, the hour for which he had lived his entire life. The horror was more than he thought he could bear.

What exactly was the horror? Mark says:

“And He was saying, “Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will.”

In the intimacy of the upper room, Jesus had passed the cup of the new covenant among the disciples. Now we find him “as Son at table with God, who as Father acts as host, passing or taking the cup (cf. Psa 23:5).”³

Jesus' precious words combine extreme, child-like intimacy with supreme theology, gut-wrenching honesty and resolute trust. At this, his darkest hour, he cries out, “Abba,” which is the Aramaic version of our intimate expression, “Daddy.” Jews did not use this term in prayer, but Jesus taught his disciples that it was to be primary in theirs. In that childlike humility he draws on all of God's sovereign power, the God who can do all things, to remove this “cup” from him.

What was this cup that Jesus was asked to drink?⁴ Its contents were usually wine, a symbol of the end product of one's labor. Wine is the ingathering of everything that has been plowed, sowed, watered, pruned, harvested, and finally, fermented. The cup was often described as containing the wrath of God in the Old Testament, which was about to be poured out on the nations in judgment:

In the hand of the Lord is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices;

He pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs. (Psa 75:8)

Just one sip from that cup was enough to make one stagger, yet, painfully, Jesus was about to drink it down to the dregs. History was quite clear: one drink from that cup was sufficient to dismantle world superpowers. That had happened with Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, to name some superpowers from the past. Rome would suffer the same fate in the not too distant future. Israel had also tasted her share of that bitter cup. Well did the nation know its potency. But, looking beyond Israel's exile in Babylon, Isaiah saw a new day coming:

“This is what your Sovereign LORD says, your God, who defends his people:

‘See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger;

from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again.’” (Isa 51:22)

Someone else would drink that cup and become the sin bearer for his people.

“But the LORD was pleased to crush Him,

He made him sick;

If He would render Himself as a guilt offering.” (Isa 53:10)

In that act of atonement, God's people would then be allowed to drink his cup of forgiveness in a new covenant that led to eternal life. The disciples had just finished drinking that very cup, and now Jesus contemplates drinking this terrible cup of the wrath of God. He is seized with panic at the thought. Yet, having expressed his heart with total honesty, he rests in God's supreme will: “Yet not what I will, but what You will.” The Son will throw himself on the full resources of God's power, crying out for that which he desperately longs, aware that God is a Father who is easily moved by our helpless state. Compassion rules the heart of this Father. Life is terribly negotiable (Gen 18:22-33; 2 Kgs 20:1-7). Knowing this, Jesus tells God not to allow his compassion to sacrifice what is best (contrast Hezekiah's request, 2 Kgs 20:12ff). Jesus will not coerce the Father to violate the supreme best of his will. What agonizing, resolute trust!

Having poured out his agony before the Father, Jesus drags himself out of the dust to check on how his sentries are doing, only to find to his dismay, his watchmen asleep at their posts. His rebuke strikes close to home. Could they not remain alert and watch for but

one hour? Commanding them back to their posts, he explains that it was not only for his benefit that they should be alert and watchful, but their own, too. They must draw near to God in humble prayer lest they become easy targets for the approaching forces of evil. A willing spirit, as was demonstrated in their earlier heroic boasts (14:29ff), by itself is of no avail in the face of temptation. Without dependent prayer that clings to God we will have only the flesh to draw on. In that event it doesn't matter which choice is made, to fight or flee; the ultimate outcome, abject failure, has already been predetermined.

Jesus returns to his prayer chamber near the olive press and once again attempts to break through to God to intervene. His prayer on this occasion is identical with the first, reflecting that God had not moved, and that our Lord still felt inadequate to face the test. Once again he returns to his sworn sentries, and again he finds them sleeping. The heaviness of their eyes suggests that spiritual forces were already at work, enemies that gained easy access through their proud hearts. When Jesus confronts them with this second blatant failure, they are so covered with shame that not even Peter can muster an appropriate excuse.⁵ The scene is repeated a third time, and his disciples are still out stone cold on the ground. The die is cast. Having three times failed to stay alert and watch, Peter will deny the Lord three times.

The next line has proven difficult for translators. It can be taken either as a disappointed question, "Are you sleeping on and resting?" or as an ironic command, "Sleep for the remainder and rest." I prefer the latter interpretation. D. A. Carson sums it up well:

The hour of the Passion is near: it is too late to pray and gain strength for the temptations ahead. His disciples may as well sleep... Doubtless Jesus could see and hear the party approaching as it crossed the Kidron with torches and climbed up the path to Gethsemane. The sleepers for whom he would die have lost their opportunity to gain strength through prayer. By contrast Jesus has prayed in agony but now rises with poise and advances to meet his betrayer.⁶

The fiercest cosmic battle of history had come to an end. Hell had unleashed all its fury, and the Son of Man was left abandoned, alone, pushed to brink of the abyss, tempted to take the forbidden fruit of self-preservation, but he remained faithful. "Not My will, but Thine, not My will, but Thine." "The Lord has always reserved Himself for this hour, and had now finally embraced the Divine Will concerning it."⁷ The Lord's darkest night became the beginning of the cosmic new creation.

What fruit can we glean in this most holy garden of Gethsemane?

II. Gethsemane, the Holiest Ground

A. Gethsemane: Where we come to know and love the Son

This was the darkest night in Jesus' life, the darkest night in all of history, the night when all the vile forces of evil were unleashed upon the Son to tempt him to fight or flee. This was the night when Jesus was most vulnerable, when everything within his being cried out to do anything but drink that cup. This was the night that crushed his soul and removed all the known boundaries for coping. This was the night when he cried out for intimate company, the night when he could be known in weakness and draw on the strength and support of others, yet he was left utterly alone, face down on the ground. Only his repeated cries of agonized prayer lifted him out of the darkest suicidal pit. This was the epoch-making night when, as the author of Hebrews wrote, "although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things, which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 5:8-10). On this night we come to know and love the Son at the deepest level for, in not forsaking the highest good, he did not forsake us. "For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2). The vision of us at the Messianic banquet table was what enabled him to endure (Ps 22:25ff; 102:18). On this night he was perfected as our high priest. Why do we pray? That we might draw near to Someone who infinitely understands.

We learn to know the Son in Gethsemane, and there too we learn to understand the way of the cup.

B. Gethsemane: Where we come to understand the way of the cup

Why did Jesus stay in the garden?⁸ Surely there were other ways to inaugurate the kingdom, ways that were more popular and less painful. There was the way of the sword: fighting evil with force, like the zealots and the Pharisees. Given Jesus' popularity, it would not have been difficult to impose the kingdom of God on Israel's relentless foes. And even if that met with failure, there was a lot less shame and humiliation dying that kind of martyr's death than what he was about to endure. The Jews repeatedly chose that way. If force seemed ill advised, then Jesus could have chosen the second way, that of the Essenes, withdrawing from the world into the quietness of the desert to cultivate personal piety and hope. Abandon the world until God fights the great cosmic battle, then return and stake your claim when the revolution is complete. Fight or flee, Masada or Qumran: these were the two established ways of bringing in the kingdom. Sadly, they remain the most common temptations to which the church has succumbed for centuries.

Gethsemane shows a third way, however, the only true way to combat evil: head straight into the center of the world's darkness and drink the cup. In one sense, we will never have to drink it, because Jesus drank it dry down to the dregs to secure our redemption. His work of atonement was finished once and for all. That is

why we will never have to drink this cup. The cup we drink is the cup of the new covenant of forgiveness and new life.

But, on the other hand, Jesus did say to John, "Can you drink this cup?...The cup I drink you shall drink" (10:38,39). In order to offer the gift of forgiveness and life to the world we will in some mysterious way drink from this cup, too. As Christ's ambassadors we must enter into the world, travel to the core of its evil and then swallow the hurt. We must forgive the emotional damage left by others in their wake. In this way we enter into the fellowship of Christ's suffering. And the more we have been hurt, the more potential we have to offer the gifts of life and healing to the world. That is a hard pill to swallow. But, the "way of Gethsemane" is not an option, it is our calling. Can you forgive? Can you swallow the emotional pain others have caused or are about to cause you? That is the way of Gethsemane. On the one hand it is a horrible cup to drink, but on the other, it is the most wonderful gift we can offer to a broken world.

C. Gethsemane: Where we come to understand our greatest weakness

The third thing we discover about Gethsemane is what it does to us. If we choose to go that way, the way into prayer and fasting, into betrayal and suffering, into swallowing the emotional damage others have done to us, and not demand justice, we discover that it will not be an easy way. Tom Wright explains that the prospect of being consumed by evil will lead us,

into the ambiguous and agonizing position of wrestling with the purposes of God, into knowing that we might have got it wrong, into wondering in anguish if maybe there's a different way after all, into being misunderstood by friends and family, into fightings without and fears within...Do not imagine that because you find yourself in turmoil, struggling with turbulent fear and uncertainty, this means you have come the wrong way or arrived at the wrong place. The idea that Christians should always have nothing but inner peace and tranquillity is at best a half-truth, at worst a romantic or existentialist betrayal of the Jesus of Gethsemane.⁹

So if you find yourself in Gethsemane, you are not in the wrong place, you are in the right place.

Finally, in Gethsemane we learn how to pray and the real power of prayer.

D. Gethsemane: Where we learn the real power of prayer

Why should we bother to pray? In prayer, on our knees, we learn that the real battles are confronted before we ever encounter evil face to face. Simple, honest, dependent prayer strengthens the soul. Rising from his knees, Jesus knew he could face his betrayer, the trial, the false accusations, the mockery, the spitting, the beatings, the spilling of his blood, and the final hours of abandonment on the tree. Prayer had not changed the Father's highest good, or his resolve, but it had changed the Son and strengthened him with the steady, supernatural resolve to save us from of sins. Will you follow? Pray Gethsemane.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. (1 Pet 5:6-11)

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1. R. G. Bratcher R. G. and E. A. Nida, *Translator's Handbook on Mark* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961) 446.

2. "was falling down" – the imperfect tense suggests repeated, continuous action.

3. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 869.

4. On the Old Testament use of the "cup" see Job 21:20; Psa 11:6; 60:3; 75:7-8; Isa 51:19, 22; 63:6; Jer 25:15-16, 27-29; 49:12; 51:57; Lam 4:21; Ezek 23:31-34; Hab 2:16; Zech 12:2.

5. See Peter's own confessional about the need for humility in resisting temptation in 1 Pet 5:6-11.

6. D.A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 545.

7. H.B. Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London, 1927) 349.

8. For this discussion I have been greatly helped by Tom Wright's chapter, "The Way to Gethsemane," in his outstanding little book, *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 81-90.

9. Wright, 87, 89.



THE SON OF MAN SEIZED

Catalog No. 1142

Mark 14:43-52

41st Message

Brian Morgan

May 28th, 2000

Earlier this year I received one of those phone calls that is a parent's worst nightmare. One of our leading families at the local high school had just lost their 21-year-old son in a car accident. I have a deep kinship with this family. Their three children are the same ages as our three, and at one time I had been their oldest daughter's softball coach. Now I was being asked to officiate at their son's funeral. What do you say when the unthinkable happens? Parents always pray for their children's safety, that God would grasp them in his strong right hand, but what does a mother or father do after something like this occurs? They feel abandoned and left alone to pick up the ashes.

Our text this morning from the gospel of Mark will speak to this kind of pain. Before the advent of the Messiah, the prophet Isaiah predicted the care that he would receive at the hands of the Father:

*"I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you."* (Isa 42:6)

And again:

"For I am the Lord your God, who upholds your right hand,

Who says to you, 'Do not fear, I will help you.'" (Isa 41:13)

Isaiah went on to say that as a result of God seizing him in his right hand, the Messiah would be made like a sharp, double-edged threshing sledge that would thresh and pulverize the mountains and make the hills like chaff (Isa 41:14-16). That was the promise: "I will lay hold of you in my hand and your enemies will be as dust." In this text, Mark uses that same word "lay hold of" (or "seize"¹) four times (Mark 14:44,46,49,51). It is the key word of the text. Instead of God laying hold of the Son of Man, however, it is God's enemies who seem to have all the power to seize him. God seems painfully absent, and apparently allows his enemies free rein.

What a worst case scenario! In our text, Mark wants his readers to focus on the different reactions of the disciples when evil appears to have the upper hand and the night grows cold. But, in a surprising ending, he paints a tiny portrait of hope to help penetrate the darkness.

I. The Son of Man Betrayed and Arrested Mark 14:43-50

And immediately while He was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, came up, accompanied by a multitude with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now he who was betraying Him had given them a signal, saying, "Whomever I shall kiss, He is the one; seize Him, and lead Him away under guard." And after coming, he immediately went to Him, saying, "Rabbi!" and kissed Him. And they laid hands on Him, and seized Him. But a certain

one of those who stood by drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Jesus answered and said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me, as against a robber? Every day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me; but this has happened that the Scriptures might be fulfilled." And they all left Him and fled. (Mark 14:43-50, NASB)

As Jesus finishes his rebuke of the disciples about their sleeping instead of watching, a figure emerges from out of the darkness. It is Judas, one of his very own, one of the twelve. Behind him is a mob made up of a detachment of well-trained Roman troops, together with the official temple police, sent from the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:52; John 18:30). Mark says that they appeared somewhat overdressed for the occasion. They were armed to the teeth: flak jackets, Uzi submachine guns, riot gear — the lot.

During festival times, the Romans were especially cautious to ensure that there would be no disruption of the public peace. In light of Jesus' great popularity, they expected to meet some resistance; therefore their mission had to be well rehearsed. First, they had to pick a time and place when Jesus would be off the public stage so that the arrest could be conducted in secret, thus avoiding any possibility of violence. Next, a signal had to be prearranged to mark Jesus out from the crowd of disciples. The sign had to be well thought out, since it was the dark of night and not everyone knew who Jesus was. The signal Judas chose was a kiss, an act that would forever transform that tender symbol of affection into one of betrayal. Once Jesus was identified the troops were to move in quickly and decisively, and "lead Jesus away securely — with no chance of escape. Once having become involved in the wicked affair, Judas did not want to make a fiasco of it."²

Judas had probably escorted the mob to the privacy of the upper room but, finding it empty, he chose the next logical spot where he thought they might find Jesus. Leading the cadre down the Kidron valley to Gethsemane and entering the garden, he easily slips past the watchmen. Beholding Jesus, he throws his arms open wide to embrace his teacher. "Rabbi," he exclaims. Then the betrayer kisses his master. This was no light peck on the cheek, but a lengthy kiss, heightening the Lord's pain, and our disgust. The ancient proverb stings: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but excessive are the kisses of an enemy" (Prov 27:6).

The signal now given, the horde of soldiers descends upon their defenseless victim, and they seize and arrest him. In the ensuing chaos an unnamed disciple grabs his sword and, in an attempt to defend his master, only succeeds in wounding the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "John tells us it was Peter who wielded the sword,

and that the ear belonged to Malcus, a servant of the high priest (John 18:10). Apparently, Peter aimed at his head; but Malcus sidestepped, and Peter only caught his ear (or perhaps just the lobe, since Jesus was said to have healed it and not replaced it - Luke 22:51).³ Peter, who did not prepare himself in prayer, suddenly is seized with an impulse to live up to his bold promise of dying loyalty. But sadly, his action is misguided in its zeal, and surprisingly short-lived. Such actions only confirm Jesus' earlier words, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." The incident may also contain a touch of irony, foreshadowing a "deaf" high priest who will refuse to listen to Jesus (14:63ff).

The turning point in the scene⁴ comes with Jesus' speech. Confronted by the intimidating military mob he neither resists nor flees, he neither fights nor runs. Strengthened in prayer, he stands steady and calm, ready to receive his betrayer. As always, Jesus speaks with authority. His words penetrate with a power rarely found on the human tongue.

"Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me, as against a robber? Every day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me;

Before they complete their evil act, Jesus forces them to face who they are by exposing their evil motives. Why were they arresting him in this manner, armed to the teeth as if he were a violent insurrectionist when in fact he was merely a rabbi? ("*Insurrectionist*" is a better translation of the Greek term than *robber*.) One can sense the biting sarcasm: "Aren't you a little overdressed for the occasion?" And why at this time, in the dark, in secret, when day after day he was easily accessible in his public teaching? The arrest reveals far more about their motives than his alleged crimes.

Jesus' next statement does not remove their culpability, but displays his confident trust in the Sovereign God:

"but this has happened that the Scriptures might be fulfilled."⁵

Here we can see the effect that Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane had on him. God had so strengthened him that he could expose and condemn their motives, and yet he could see that in God's sovereignty they would be free to play all their evil cards. It was "necessary that the Scriptures might be fulfilled." "He was numbered among the transgressors" (Isa 53:12). It is a great gift to be able to discern between the evil choices of men and the invisible hand of God directing all things for the establishment of the kingdom. This is the supreme fruit of prayer: a resolute trust in God in the face of the treacherous scheming of men.

As Jesus speaks the final word "*fulfilled*," all his disciples flee, every last one. "The words drive home, as it were with hammer-blow, the failure of the disciples without exception and the complete forsakenness of Jesus."⁶ With the flight of the disciples, Zechariah's long awaited words are fulfilled,

**"Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd,
And against the man, My Associate,"
Declares the LORD of hosts.
"Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered."
(Zech 13:7)**

As the scene ends we are left in the throes of divine mystery. The Son of Man, to whom Daniel said would be-

long all power and authority forever and ever, is now *seized* (the term has been used three times) by his enemies and abandoned by his friends. The long-awaited Son of Man, who would be victorious over all world powers, amazingly, has fallen victim to them.

As we grope to understand the meaning of these events, Mark adds to the mystery. An anonymous bystander now takes center-stage.

II. The Young Man Is Seized But Escapes

Mark 14:51-52

And a certain young man was following Him, wearing a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. But he left the linen sheet behind, and escaped naked.

Enter an unnamed young man. In contrast to the disciples who are fleeing at this critical hour, the young man is said to be "following" Jesus. And, in contrast to the overdressed mob, he is decidedly underdressed, clothed only with a linen garment over his naked body. This suggests that he was wealthy, since the garment described is not an undergarment but an outer tunic or sheet. Normally this was made of wool, but this one is made of linen, an extremely expensive material worn only by the rich.

Who is this mysterious onlooker to the arrest of Jesus? Scholars have speculated that the young man is John Mark, the author of the gospel. He in fact did come from a wealthy home, and the setting for the upper room could very well have been his own home. We can well imagine him on Passover night, unable to sleep in the warm April air. As he tosses and turns on his bed, he senses a strange foreboding in the air. The inquisitive teenager climbs out his window and scampers through the dark streets of Jerusalem to view the events in the nearby Kidron valley. He comes upon the scene in Gethsemane, clothed only in his linen sheet. As Jesus is arrested, the soldiers spot him hiding among the trees. They lay their hands on him and seize him, but he manages to wiggle out of linen tunic, escaping naked back into the night air. Scholars surmise that this is Mark's way of adding his signature to his work. As Theodore Zan remarks, "Mark paints a small picture of himself in the corner of his work."⁷

The scholars may well be right, but I think the function of the anonymous young man may also serve another purpose. Gundry suggests that the double emphasis of the linen cloth,

anticipates the linen cloth in which Jesus will be buried (15:46). The young man's nakedness, except for the linen cloth, may anticipate the soldiers' dividing Jesus' garments among themselves (cf. 15:24 with 15:21; also nakedness as precursive to resurrection, 1 Cor 15:37; 2 Cor 5:3; 1 Clem 24:1-5)...Leaving the linen cloth behind anticipates Jesus' resurrection, portrayed as a leaving behind of his linen burial cloth. Mark will also call the angel in the empty tomb 'a young man' to recollectively associate the present young man with Jesus' resurrection. [That young man will not be wearing a linen cloth, but a white robe symbolic of the resurrection life.] Though neither young man is Jesus himself, together they represent him in his death, burial and resurrection...And just as the young man flees the scene of Jesus' arrest, so the women who discover the emptiness of Jesus' tomb will flee the scene of his resurrection.⁸

What then is the purpose of this incident? Mark shows that though the worst possible thing happens — the Son Man is seized — that will not be the last word. The evil of men may have free rein to execute their plans to the fullest, but, in a glorious resurrection there will be a grand reversal of our Lord's arrest, crucifixion and burial.

III. The Fourfold Response to Seizure

Our text leaves us with the question, Where do we find ourselves in the story of this dark night? If we stand back and take in the whole scene, we discover that every player in this story is reacting to Jesus' betrayal and arrest, which is the opening display of the shame of the cross in all its scandal of weakness. This story recounts the human reaction of the disciples when they are confronted with Jesus' humiliation and he allows evil to overpower and consume him. Our response is highly significant. If we don't get it right here, we won't get it right when it's our turn to act out our part in the sacred story. How will we respond when the unthinkable occurs and we are asked to drink this cup?

A. Judas — betrayal for benefit

Mark gives four different responses, represented by Judas, Peter, the twelve, and finally, the anonymous young man. First, the response of Judas, one of the twelve. We can't be sure when Judas purposed in his heart to betray Jesus. Was it on one of the occasions when Jesus made known his kingdom agenda, saying that he came to die and under no circumstances would he carry out a political revolution by force? To Judas, the thought of swallowing the world's pain was shameful at best. Surely Peter's impulsive cry, "You shall not die," echoed Judas' sentiments as well. The only difference was that Peter, unlike Judas, was teachable. When Jesus shot back at Peter that shameful rebuke, "Get behind me, Satan," Judas' blood boiled. He would not submit.

Perhaps the point of no return came when Jesus chose a colt, the symbol of humility, for his entry into the city. If that was to be Jesus' way, Judas would have none of it. Perhaps he felt betrayed, having given up everything to follow Jesus. Swallowed in his own disillusionment, he chose another path. He would remain in the role of intimate follower, appearing loyal and lavish in his affection for Jesus. Beneath the guise of affection, however, he would seek to use Jesus for his own personal gain. Betray him with a kiss, and in the process make a buck. That is the Judas way. This betrayal for money made such an impact on the disciples that the early church took measures to ensure it did not happen again. The *Didachè*, the first century handbook of Christian instruction, says that if a traveling apostle ever asked for money he was to be considered a false prophet: "And let the apostle when he goes forth take nothing except bread (enough to last him) till he reach his lodgings for the night. But if he ask for money he is a false prophet." Sadly, our generation has not heeded the warning. The world's perception of the church is the Judas view: Christian leaders using the humiliation of Christ for personal gain.

B. Peter — fight

The second response is represented by Peter, the one who was sleeping instead of being vigilant and praying. He is ill-prepared for the crisis. Faced with the prospect of

Jesus' arrest, he is seized by an uncontrollable urge to fight back. An unbridled impulse grips him and he lunges into action, crossing that sacred boundary and making an illicit reach for a weapon of this world. He is not very skilled at using it, however. He can't even hit his mark, and leaves behind a bloody mess. This is a sad commentary on what results whenever we attempt to fight evil with the weapons of this world. After the blood is spilled there are no winners and there is no redemption. And it is difficult to erase the memory for the victims, the slaves whose ears we have lopped off. Ask a Jew today what the symbol of the cross means to him. I have found very few whose image is the Isaiah's Suffering Servant, or the Lamb of God who was slain on our behalf. More often than not they are gripped with pain as they recall the horror of the Holocaust or the pogroms when they were labeled Christ-killers. The message is clear: put away your sword.

C. The Disciples — flee

To these two responses, Mark adds a third: flight. As Jesus takes command of the situation, by exposing true motives and placing his confidence in God's sovereign hand, all the disciples flee. When the die seems cast and the cross looms imminent, fear takes over, and flight seems to be the only way out. We can't do anything to resist evil, so we flee to the desert or the mountains. Removing ourselves from the crossroads of the world we flee the schools, the community centers and the halls of justice and surround ourselves with other disillusioned followers. We are content to warm ourselves at their hearths and wait until everything has been accomplished. Many Christians spend their retirement years doing just that. But Mark says that is not an option. We can run from the garden but we can't escape the pain.

D. The Young Man — following Jesus

The fact that all three of these responses are played out by the disciples suggests these temptations will be common to the church. But Mark suggests that though these will be our most natural reactions to the humiliation of the cross, hidden within the text is a fourth way. An unnamed youth makes a cameo appearance in the gospel. Approaching the scene as a hidden observer, he arrives with no weapons and very little clothing. So captivated is he by what he sees, he continues to follow Jesus, even when everyone else has fled. Here then is one who does not fight or flee. Suddenly he is drawn into the very center of the drama, *seized* by the same fate as Jesus. Outmanned and outgunned, death looks inevitable. But, though he endures the humiliation of his own nakedness, amazingly he is given back his life and escapes unscathed, leaving his wealth (*the linen sheet*) behind. Is Mark saying that this is a foretaste of the resurrection life given to those who are willing to endure the cross and yet despise the shame? I think it is. But notice that this long-range view is so important, God takes great care to leave behind fragrant hints of it even while we are trampled by our worst fears.

As a pastor I've learned in these times of great tragedy to be observant for these heavenly signs. As I entered the home of our friends who had just lost their son, I was greeted by two parents numbed by the pain. But after a few moments the mother escorted me into her son's bedroom, and there on the wall was a new poster he had recently put over his bed. It was a photograph of a magnificent sunset over the desert. Underneath it read, "When you

see a sign from Heaven.” That photo would become the cover for their memorial service program, and I spoke on why I believe in heaven.

The sad thing about Mark’s text is, because the disciples fled in fear they missed the encouraging sign from heaven. I, too, have fled, and missed the encouraging signs as well. One of my most painful moments came on Friday, December 2nd 1976. I got a call from the hospital saying that my newborn daughter was very sick. One medical test told the whole story: she had the same enzyme deficiency that my son had, and she would not live. I made one last trip to the hospital with a friend to visit my daughter Jessica. I could only gaze at her a short time before I turned away, unable to bear the pain. As I left the hospital waves of grief came crashing over me. I wanted to weep, but I was too embarrassed to weep in front of my friends. I was not there when my daughter Jessica died. She died alone, abandoned by her father. When the hospital graciously offered to take care of her body, I welcomed that. I could not bear the thought of laying her little body in the ground. How could we have another memorial service? The thought was too morbid to me. So, like the disciples, I ran.

Sixteen years later, God called me back to that same hospital. Again, it was in December, and it was raining (just as it was when my two children died). Another son of one of our church families was about to die. I did not want to go, but I was mysteriously yet powerfully drawn to watch as this wonderful couple loved their son and refused to turn away from grief. As he lay dying, we held hands around his bed and sang hymns and psalms. After we had sung the first verse of the hymn, *It Is Well With My Soul*, I looked around for someone else to lead, because I didn’t know all the words of the second verse. At the foot of the bed stood an unnamed nurse, clothed in white. She knew the verses, and she lifted up her beautiful voice and sang forcefully. It was as if angels had come into the room. Heaven united with earth, and love burst our breasts. We felt a transcendent sense of peace, of power and victory over death. I’ll never forget it.

God was gracious to call me back to my Gethsemane to see what I did not want to see, that sign from heaven that I had run away from. I discovered that, even when I left my daughter, He was there all along, caring with a love that transcended death. Following that evening, I composed these lines as an offering to the God of Gethsemane:

*O Holy night, angels sang,
The grip of night grew limp,
He appeared
And each soul felt its worth.*

*He did not turn away
Traumatized by pain
But stretched out His hand
And placed it into the flame.*

*Beyond His hand I saw
The wrist - impaled by my spear
Pierced so deep with wounds
Yet draws me near.*

*Beyond the wrist, His gaze,
O that gaze, ablaze ablaze
With such love it burst my breast
Evoking deepest praise.*

*O death where is thy victory,
O grave where is thy sting?*

*Captured with awe, I stared and stared
And then I knew,
That when I left,
He had cared for you.*

Amen.

1. “to seize” - *krateo* - means to take into one’s possession or custody, as to apprehend, arrest, often by force.
2. Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 766.
3. Wessel.
4. The text follows a beautifully constructed chiasmic pattern:
 - A. The Son of Man betrayed by a well known friend, 14:43-46 then seized by an ‘overdressed’ mob
 - B. One **disciple** fights 14:47
 - X. Jesus’ speech** 14:48,49
 - publicly exposes the evil motives of his secret seizure while *simultaneously* publicly trusts in the sovereign plan of the Almighty God
 - B’. All **disciples** flee 14:50
 - A’. One unknown young man seized by the mob, 14:51,5, but escapes naked.
5. On the Scriptures being *fulfilled*, Gundry notes not only Zech 13:7, but also Exod 24:8; Isa 53:12; Psa 22:2;8-9, 19; 41:9; 69:21; 109:25; Lam 2:15. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 861.
6. C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge, 1959) 438.
7. Quoted from Michael Green’s lectures on Mark at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.
8. Gundry, 862-863.



SILENT TRUTH AND FALSE TESTIMONY

Catalog No. 1143

Mark 14:53-72

42nd Message

Brian Morgan

June 4th, 2000

Last Wednesday, I officiated at the funeral of a woman who had spent the last year of her life paralyzed and confined to bed in a convalescent hospital. Hazel Worth had one of the sweetest spirits I have ever encountered. She gave glory to God every moment of her severe illness. Her funeral overflowed with the unanimous praise of those who knew her all her life. But the testimony that impressed me most was that of an unnamed girl who knew Hazel for a mere twenty minutes. This young woman's boyfriend was assigned to install a new phone by Hazel's bed. He was so impressed with Hazel's life that he took his girlfriend along to meet her while he worked. When the young woman spoke, tears filled her eyes. Her voice cracked, but she managed to say a few words. Even though she was a stranger, she said, there was a look in Hazel's eyes that drew her right into her heart and for the first time in her life she felt like a daughter. As Hazel lay paralyzed, she taught the young woman how to dance with her fingers. Those twenty minutes so drenched her in love she resolved to change how she lived.

When someone we know is near death, seconds become measured in years and moments become a lifetime so dense with emotion we can barely contain it. At these times lives take on their true color and everything that ever had meaning comes clearly into view. This is what happens to us when we examine Jesus' passion narrative. Time slows down and every detail is filled with a sea of emotion.

Our text from the gospel of Mark this morning covers the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin. Bracketing the trial are two vignettes from the story of Peter. In the opening scene, the apostle is following Jesus at a distance; now, in the closing scene, he denies Jesus three times. From Mark's viewpoint, the story reveals much more about this disciple (and us, by implication) than the Jewish religious leaders who condemned Jesus to death. This is how the text must be understood and applied or we will fall into the grievous error of church history, blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus. This error was, in part, responsible for the heinous crimes of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms in Russia, the expulsions in Spain, and the terrible Holocaust of our own times.

So we will observe the trial of Jesus through the eyes of Peter, the disciple who followed at a distance and became lost in denial. In this holy text we will learn of three things: First, our Lord as a faithful and true witness; second, the seriousness of our sin the cross which faces us with; and finally, God's amazing love in his confirming choice of us.

I. Peter Following from a Distance (14:53-54)

A. Jesus led to the Sanhedrin (14:53)

And they led Jesus away to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes gathered

together. (Mark 14:53, NASB)

Following the betrayal by Judas, the arrest of Jesus came off as planned, without a hitch. There was very little resistance, only one brief display of violence which Jesus himself quelled. Under arrest now, he is led directly to a large room upstairs in the palace of Caiaphas, where the Sanhedrin will hold court. The Sanhedrin consisted of some seventy members. Mark's use of the term "all" suggests that at least a quorum of twenty-three were present to pass a ruling on the Jew from Galilee. Normally they would gather in the open-air of the marketplace to pass their rulings, but on this night they will meet in Caiaphas' home so as to ensure secrecy. Mark makes no mention of the initial hearing before Annas, who had been high priest until he was deposed by Pilate's predecessor, Valerius Gratus. Though currently deposed, this man still remained the most influential member of the Sanhedrin. As Bargil Pixner writes:

The house of Annas had succeeded in almost monopolizing the office of high priest for its own family. During the period of the Roman Procurators, this office was held with few exceptions by the family of Annas. In the very beginning, Annas himself had been high priest for nine years (6-15 A.D.). He was followed by his son Elazar (16-17 A.D.); then it was Annas' son-in-law, Joseph Caiaphas, who held the position for nineteen years (18-37 A.D.)...This family of high priests also formed a central council in the Sanhedrin. It seems that the most influential person of the Sanhedrin was Annas. As emeritus high priest, he was the gray eminence. Second to him were his son-in-law Caiaphas and his son, the former high priest Elazar. These three, together with their confidants, formed an inner circle of high priest and former high priests within the Sanhedrin.¹

This inner circle functioned as a powerful executive committee within the ruling body. In their hands now lies the fate of the Jew and their nation. It is ironic that, despite all their authority, Mark doesn't even dignify them by mentioning their names. Though they think they wield all the decision-making power in the kingdom, from the writer's point of view they are mere pawns in the drama. The only names we find in the text are Jesus and Peter. This is primarily their story.

B. Peter Following at a Distance (14:54)

And Peter had followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the officers, and warming himself at the fire (or "light"). (14:54)

Peter, now personally identified, is following Jesus "from a distance." Plummer writes: "When the first panic was over, Peter's affection re-asserted itself."² Apparently, after he fled the garden, Peter's love for Jesus took hold of

him and he could not bring himself to desert him completely. Driven by curiosity, he makes his way behind the arresting mob, under the cover of darkness, right up to the courtyard of Caiaphas' palace. John adds a personal note telling how Peter managed to get past the gate. Apparently there was another "unnamed" disciple, presumably John, already inside who knew the high priest. When Peter arrived at the gate, the other disciple spoke to the servant girl on duty and she let Peter into the inner courtyard, around which the palace was built. Peter entered through the archway and was drawn to the middle of the place, where a number of soldiers were keeping themselves warm around a charcoal fire. From this vantage point Peter had a clear view of Jesus. The symbol of the fire is double-edged. Peter longs for its warmth but not its light, for he wants to keep his identity secret. But Mark uses a subtle word play here, substituting the word "light" for "fire," suggesting that the light of the fire will indeed give Peter's testimony away and provide precious little warmth.

Next, Mark takes us into the council, where we hear the preliminary testimony against Jesus.

II. Inside the Court: Silent Truth vs. False Testimony (14:55-65)

A. False Testimony (14:55-59)

Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death; and they were not finding any. For many were giving false testimony against Him, and yet their testimony was not consistent. And some stood up and began to give false testimony against Him, saying, "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands.'" And not even in this respect was their testimony consistent. (14:55-59)

Here we get a sense of how securely this court was rigged. It was well into the early hours of morning, yet the court was able to find witnesses. Where did they find witnesses at that hour? They hired them, of course. The issue the Sanhedrin thought would bring condemnation from the court was Jesus' attack on the temple. Desecration of the Holy place was considered a capital offense. I imagine Caiaphas put forward Jesus' action of cleansing the temple without official sanction as a serious threat to the sanctity of the Holy place, not to mention his prophetic sermon announcing its complete destruction. Then Caiaphas called for eyewitnesses. They seized upon Jesus' statement, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19-21). John went on to say that Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. But the witnesses interpreted what he said literally, and with evil intent attempt to portray Jesus as a violent insurrectionist who was planning a terrorist attack on the Temple.

The law demanded that in cases requiring the death penalty (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15) the prosecution had to present two witnesses with consistent statements. It was a good tactic, but the more these witnesses were questioned, the more inconsistent their testimony became. As they began to utter inconsistencies, Caiaphas started to feel uneasy. This approach was heading nowhere. So at this juncture, he cuts right to the heart of the matter, asking Jesus to take the stand.

B. Silent Truth

And the high priest stood up and came forward and questioned Jesus, saying, "Do You make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?" But He kept silent, and made no answer. (14:60-61a)

Caiaphas rises out of his seat, steps into the midst of the assembly and asks Jesus to respond to the allegations. But Jesus is silent. The silence must have been deafening in that tension filled courtroom. "In majestic silence, Jesus refused to dignify the self-refuting testimony by any explanation of his own."³ Exasperated, the high priest has but one card left to play, and he plays it with all the authority of his office.

C. Testify Under Oath

Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" (14:61b-62)

Matthew adds that Caiaphas charged Jesus under oath by the living God to say if he was the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed ("*The Son of the Blessed*" was another term for Messiah). Backed into a corner, Jesus had no choice now but to testify. "If he refuses to answer, he breaks a legally imposed oath."⁴ If he answers as they think he will, he will be guilty of blasphemy and liable for the death penalty by his own admission. The historic moment has arrived. The answer all Israel has been waiting for will now be delivered from the very lips of Jesus. Who does he truly claim to be? What will he say under divine oath to this ruling body that has already determined his fate?

And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (14:62)

Jesus' answer is a powerful testimony about not only who he claimed to be, but what the future of the court would be. He begins with an unequivocal, "I am." This is a resonant echo of the divine name: "I am the Messiah." Now the truth is out. In the eyes of the court it is blasphemy. But Jesus doesn't end there. He hammers home the implications of his statement. In a daring move he exchanges roles, from accused to prosecuting attorney. He combines two texts from the Old Testament, Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1. Both speak of the enthronement of God's Messiah King and his receiving power, dominion and authority over all his enemies. This is a daring claim of the authority he will receive at his ascension when he indeed will fulfill what Daniel and David saw. And he tells them that they will see it in their lifetime. Soon they will be in his courtroom, and then their roles will be reversed. On that day he will not be present as an accused but as Judge and they will be the accused. In 70 A.D., that day came and the sentence was fully executed.

Jesus' claim resulted in quite a display of emotion in the courtroom.

D. The Accused Condemned (14:63-65)

And tearing his clothes, the high priest said, "What further need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?" And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death. And some began to spit at Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him with their fists, and to say to Him, "Proph-

esy!" And the officers received Him with slaps in the face. (14:63-65)

Forcing Jesus to testify has paid off. No longer was there a need for witnesses. The high priest had obtained first-hand testimony from the lips of Jesus that clearly substantiated the charge of blasphemy. In an emotional display, the high priest tears his clothing. His action signaled more than grief, for in the case of the high priest, it was "a formal judicial act minutely regulated by the Talmud" (Taylor). It revealed that his ears had just been desecrated by blasphemy and that the death penalty was in order. In rapid succession the other members of the court sound their approval. They vent years of pent-up anger, turning their refined speech into a trail of spit and their scribal fingers into clenched fists, striking Jesus repeatedly on the head. As he attempts to shield the blows, they mock him and demand he prophesy who had hit him "This was their way of trying to make a mockery of Jesus' messianic claims, because a rabbinical interpretation of Isaiah 11:2-4 stated that the Messiah could judge by smell and did not need sight."⁵

As Jesus receives the blows, we can hear the words of Isaiah:

***"I was not disobedient,
Nor did I turn back.
I gave My back to those who strike Me,
And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;
I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting."***

(Isa 50:5b,6)

While all this is going on in the upstairs room, Peter is watching from below. Adding to the horror of what is happening to Jesus will be the pain of what this disciple finds out about himself.

III. Peter's Denial in the Courtyard (14:66-72)

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him, and said, "You, too, were with Jesus the Nazarene." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." And he went out onto the porch. And the maid saw him, and began once more to say to the bystanders, "This is one of them!" But again he was denying it. And after a little while the bystanders were again saying to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean too." But he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" And immediately a cock crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had made the remark to him, "Before a cock crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And he broke down and wept.

While Jesus is being mocked, spit upon and beaten in the upper room, Peter is below, warming himself by the fire. But the servant girl who probably had allowed Peter to slip past the gate looks intently into his face by the light of the fire. Then it dawns on her: she had seen him with Jesus at the temple. Her contempt for Jesus spills out in her words, "you were with *that* Nazarene!" The stunned Peter is ill prepared to respond. He seizes upon his first impulse and denies any knowledge of Jesus. "Peter denied her charge by 'using the form common in rabbinical law for a formal, legal denial' (e.g. M. *Shebuoth* VIII. 3)."⁶ Fearful of being discovered, he retreats to the archway that led into

the street. But the servant girl perseveres and follows him, pointing him out to those "standing around," presumably those in the employ of the high priest. Her pointed accusation prompts a more firm denial from Peter. Then, when pressed to the wall by those "standing around" (who now take note of his Galilean accent), Peter goes over the edge. His only way out is to place himself under oath, and the moment he does that he commits blasphemy. No sooner have his words left his mouth than he hears a cock crowing a second time, and the words of Jesus come flooding back, "Before a cock crows twice, you will deny Me three times." Luke adds that at that very moment the Lord "turned and looked straight at Peter" (Luke 22:61). Peter could not hold his cover any longer: "He broke down and wept."

IV. Lessons from the Courtroom

Mark has crafted his story to show that in reality there were two legal proceedings taking place this night, one in the upper room, where Jesus is giving his testimony before the all-male Sanhedrin, the second below in the courtyard, where Peter is testifying before a female slave and unnamed bystanders. The Sanhedrin, the most influential body in Israel, had charged Jesus with crimes meriting the death penalty. The servants, the most inconsequential officials in the land, had no authority to impose any legal sanctions against Peter. Jesus is forced to testify under oath to the high priest; Peter testifies under a self-imposed oath. One oath provokes the simple truth, the other three forceful denials. Jesus is wrongfully accused of blasphemy for his attested relationship with God the Father, and thus condemned to death; Peter commits blasphemy, denying any association with the Son, and lives. One freely opens his face to censure, mocking, beating and spitting, the other covers his face in shame. The thread that connects the two trials as one is the penetrating cry of a cock crowing; an insignificant cock, whose piercing cry penetrates deeper into Peter's heart than any *shophar* in all Israel. Mark's clear intention is that the impact this had on Peter would continue on in the church. Peter broke down and wept. Bold, brazen Peter, now convulsed in sobs. This is the only time he is described as weeping in this gospel. Why does he weep? Why should we weep?

A. The Lord as a Faithful and True Witness

First, Peter weeps because of what he had just learned about Jesus. Though he was brave enough to follow only at a distance he did get a rare glimpse into the Lord's character at this hour. Backed into a corner with all the world forces ready to pounce, here was one who would not compromise the truth, bearing faithful testimony about himself though it would cost him his life. Push this one to the limit, spit on him, pluck out his beard, beat him, humiliate him, but he will never compromise who he is. He is Messiah king and the glorious Son of Man who will reign at the right hand of God forever and ever. We must never credit Jesus with anything less than that. You may say he was mistaken, but never say he regarded himself as merely a good teacher or the victim of circumstance. If you want to know who a man thinks he is, see what he says when the truth is about to cost him his life. Then you will learn what he believes in.

What was it that strengthened Jesus to remain faithful? It was his prayer in Gethsemane. That prayer gave him the

spiritual insight to see beyond the veil to the heavenly court. He knew that the Sanhedrin were in power only temporarily, and that they were but pawns in the kingdom of God. Behind them stood the heavenly court. Soon he would take his stand in that courtroom, not as an accused or as an attorney, but as Judge. On that day he would impose their sentence. This testimony has strengthened many martyrs in church history and at times has converted their captors. This is why Peter weeps.

B. Peter as a Faithless Witness

The second reason he weeps is because while he is seeing the Lord in all his glory, at the same time he is learning the naked truth about himself. When our lives are on the line, our greatest boasts prove faithless. We will try and dismember ourselves from the very one who gives us life at the hour when he needs us most. And our stage is so much smaller and the prosecuting panel far less intimidating than the Sanhedrin: the waitress at the counter, the civil servant who sells us stamps, a neighbor, even a relative. The human reaction to persecution is denial, and in the extreme it can lead to outright blasphemy. The implication is clear. When we come face to face with Jesus, the sin that is dealt with is spiritual pride. In our own strength we cannot follow Christ's example, even after we have made bold commitments. When you realize that, whenever your cock crows, you weep. In essence, this is sweetest sorrow you will ever know, because you are beginning to understand the pain you bring to him who died for you.

C. The Love of God Who Cannot Deny Himself

But there was a third reason Peter wept. He wept not only because of what he heard, but what he saw: the Lord looked at him. It was a look that knew everything about him and still loved him and wanted him for his own. Though we try and dismember ourselves, and may even commit blasphemy, Christ still chooses to love us and use us. It is this kind of sweet sorrow that keeps us from ever becoming Pharisees again. This is the kind of sorrow that seared itself so deeply into the heart of Peter that after Pentecost, he was able to bear the faithful and true witness before the same Sanhedrin without fear of death. And it was this kind of sorrow that gave him the wonderful demeanor of being poor in spirit until he died.

This is the kind of sorrow Zechariah predicted would overtake Israel some day:

“And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born.”
(Zech 12:10)

Wouldn't it be wonderful if this kind of sorrow overtook His church today? May God grant that might see such a spirit of mourning in our lifetime. Amen.

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1. “The trial of Jesus took place in two stages, a religious trial followed by a civil one. Each had three episodes. The religious trial included (1) the preliminary hearing before Annas (reported only in John 18:12-14, 19-23); (2) the trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53-65); and (3) the trial before the same group just after day-break (Mark 15:1).” Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 767. I have greatly depended on Wessel's material for my text.

2. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus in Jerusalem, his first and last day in Judea* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin, 1996) 109-110.

3. A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914) 335.

4. Hiebert, *Gospel of Mark*, 371, quoted by Wessel, 769.

5. D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 554.

6. Wessel, 770.



THE GREAT EXCHANGE

Catalog No. 1144
 Mark 15:1-15
 43rd Message
 Brian Morgan
 June 11th, 2000

“Rethinking the Death Penalty” is the cover story of the current *Newsweek* magazine. The revelation that through DNA testing, 87 inmates on death rows around the United States have been found innocent has given rise to a national debate about the death penalty. This certainly doesn’t speak well of our justice system, which at times seems to condemn the innocent and allows the guilty to go free. Imagine the horror of a parent discovering that his child was executed for crimes he did not commit.

With this in mind, perhaps we can begin to imagine the emotions of the Father during the trial of the Son, when the greatest exchange in human history was about to occur. We find the account in chapter 15 of Mark’s gospel.

I. Binding the Sacrificial Lamb (15:1)

And early in the morning the chief priests with the elders and scribes, and the whole Sanhedrin, immediately held a consultation; and binding Jesus, they led Him away, and delivered Him up to Pilate. (Mark 15:15, NASB)

As night gives way to morning, the Sanhedrin consult together to come to a final resolution regarding what to do with Jesus. Their quandary was that they had condemned him to death for blasphemy, but they lacked the authority to carry out the death penalty. The decision was therefore made to have Jesus tried in the civil court. “The decision that he was worthy of death had now to be officially formulated and confirmed and laid down in a bill of indictment for the Roman governor.”¹ But surprisingly, the indictment will not be the charge of blasphemy, since the Romans took no interest in religious law. Instead, it would be one of high treason.

Luke records the charge of the Sanhedrin, “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king” (Luke 23:2). It is ironic that Jesus, who spent his life and ministry disappointing the crowds, and even his own disciples, because he emphatically refused to take up the sword, will now be tried and sentenced as a political revolutionary who posed a threat to the Roman peace. As Moule writes: “Jesus, who is, indeed, king of the Jews in a deeply spiritual sense, has refused to lead a political uprising. Yet now, condemned for blasphemy by the Jews because of his spiritual claims, he is accused by them also before Pilate by being precisely what he had disappointed the crowds for failing to be—a political insurgent.”²

While the court deliberated, Jesus probably spent his final hours in the dungeon of the house of Caiaphas. In reality, the place was a dark, damp cistern. Imagine his cries of despair as he prayed the psalms of David during his last night on earth in that deep pit.³

O Lord, the God who save me, day and night I cry out before you.

May my prayer come before you; turn you ear to my cry.

For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave.

I am counted among those who go down to the pit;

I am like a man without strength.

I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave,

whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.

You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depth.

Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.

You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them.

I am confined and cannot escape.

My eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, O LORD, every day;

I spread out my hands to you.

You have taken my companions and loved one from me;

the darkness is my closest friend. (Psa 88:1-10, 19)

By dawn the decision had been made. Jesus was pulled out of the cistern with ropes, bound and led away under armed guard to appear before the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate. The strong verb that Mark chooses, “led away,” conveys the sense that Jesus was practically carried before Pilate. What a shameful thing. Yet, during this whole fiasco of trumped-up charges and the humiliation of a police escort, not a word is heard from the lamb. Isaiah’s words echo in the background...

He was oppressed and He was afflicted

Yet He did not open His mouth;

Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,

And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,

So He did not open His mouth. (Isa 53:7)

The Sanhedrin now turn the Jesus problem over to Pilate. The procurator took his official residence in Herod’s palace, in northwestern Jerusalem. Normally, Roman governors resided in the beautiful port city of Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast, but during feast times they customarily traveled to Jerusalem to ensure that the peace was kept. In the city they took their stay in Herod’s palatial Upper Palace.

Placing their agenda before Pilate was no guarantee of success for the Sanhedrin, however. Pilate was a “mean minded and brutal official. Contemporary records mention no less than five occasions on which his insensitive handling of situations led to serious unrest among his Jewish

or Samaritan subjects, three times resulting in a massacre, while a fourth was narrowly averted.”⁴ On one occasion he had his soldiers carry flags bearing the idolatrous image of Caesar into Jerusalem, provoking a riot in the process. Another time he raided the sacred Corban treasury of the temple to pay for the building of an aqueduct. Josephus describes this incident:

This roused the populace to fury, and when Pilate visited Jerusalem they surrounded the tribunal and shouted him down. But he had foreseen this disturbance, and had made the soldiers mix with the mob, wearing civilian clothing over their armor, and with orders not to draw their swords but to use clubs on the tumultuous. He now gave the signal from the tribunal and the Jews were cudged, so that many died from the blows, and many that fled were trampled to death by their friends. The fate of those who perished horrified the crowd into silence.⁵

Pilate, no lover of the Jews, will prove to be anything but a rubber stamp for the Sanhedrin. Upon hearing that a prisoner was to be brought before him, he went to the courthouse to hear the case, as was the custom, in the early morning. “In Roman trials the magistrate normally heard the charges first, questioned the defendant and listened to his defense, sometimes permitted several such exchanges, and then retired with his advisors to decide on a verdict, which was then promptly carried out.”⁶ John records that the priests did not want to enter the heathen residence lest they become unclean (Jn 18:29-30) and therefore unable to eat the Passover lamb, so Pilate met them out in front. The unruliness of the crowd made the investigation difficult, however, so he went back inside and summoned Jesus to him. Their statement that Jesus claimed “to be Christ, a king” (Luke 23:2) had to be taken seriously, because of the history of hotheaded zealots and fundamentalist Pharisees. So Pilate puts the question directly to Jesus.

II. Silent Before the Shearers (15:2-5)

And Pilate questioned Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And answering He said to him, “It is as you say.” And the chief priests began to accuse Him harshly. And Pilate was questioning Him again, saying, Do You make no answer? See how many charges they bring against You!” But Jesus made no further answer; so that Pilate was amazed. (15:2-5)

To the question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus’ answer, “You say it is,” seems simple and direct. But, does Jesus simply mean, “Yes, it is as you say,” or is he making the more qualified statement, “Yes, you say I am the king of the Jews; but you have no idea what that means.” John’s gospel implies the latter (18:34-38). Jesus is king, but on a much larger scale than Pilate could have dreamed. To reduce Messiah to a competing political ruler would be absurd. His kingdom is not of this world in its origin, authority or implementation. It is much larger than that.

With Jesus’ answer the chief priests hammer home their charges. But Jesus says nothing in response to their pounding waves of accusation. “If Jesus had said nothing at all, Pilate would be bound to condemn him, since in the Roman system the defense depended heavily on the defendant’s response. But Jesus has spoken.”⁷ His defense of two words is more than adequate. Nothing more is needed, so he remains silent. His silence has a deep impact on

Pilate, who is becoming more favorable to him and less inclined to being a pawn for the Sanhedrin, who he discerned were driven purely by envy.

The pretense of loyalty to the Emperor was too flimsy a reason to rob an innocent man his life. So Pilate, no friend to the Jews, plays a card that he hopes will give the appearance of generosity while at the same time thwarting the plans of the Jewish council. Roman law granted that on Passover the imperial magistrate could grant amnesty to an already condemned prisoner. Three such candidates were available, for whom crosses had already been ordered. To these three Jesus will now be added.

III. The Great Exchange (15:6-15)

Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested. And the man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection. And the multitude went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them. And Pilate answered them, saying, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” For he was aware that the chief priests had delivered Him up because of envy. (15:6-10)

Pilate is balancing on a tightrope. He hates the Jews but, not wanting to risk another riot, he plays the amnesty card. In the midst of the commotion another condemned Jew, Barabbas, waits in the background. Who is this man? The name Barabbas in Aramaic means “son of the father,” and is found mostly in rabbinical literature as a nickname for the sons of famous rabbis.⁸ It’s interesting to speculate that Barabbas might have been the son of a great rabbi. He was raised in a god-fearing home but had become a notorious prodigal turned terrorist. Though his background may remain a mystery, his misdeeds were well known. His attempt to overthrow the Roman oppressors had led to murder and his imprisonment. News of the revolt had become well known, and a crowd had made their way to Pilate’s tribunal to secure his release.

As they shouted out their request, Pilate may have been confused as to whose release they were seeking. Some ancient Greek manuscripts preserve the man’s name as “Jesus Barrabus” (“Jesus son of the father”), which may have caused Pilate to think they were asking for Jesus of Nazareth. So in response, he puts forward this supposed “King of the Jews,” hoping to be done with this affair and, at the same time, thwart the desires of the Jewish leaders.

But the chief priests were one step ahead of their Roman rival.

But the chief priests stirred up the multitude to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead. And answering again, Pilate was saying to them, “Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?” And they shouted back, “Crucify Him!” (15:11-13)

Leaving nothing to chance, the chief priests had already infiltrated the crowd. Now they stir the mob into a frenzy, making Barabbas the equivalent of a national hero. It was his release they wanted. But if Barabbas is released, what will Pilate do with Jesus? Having been warned by his wife not to have anything to do with “that innocent man,” (Matt 27:19) Pilate puts the question to the crowd. Two words come ringing back, “Crucify him!” Dumbfounded,

Pilate presses the case for Jesus' innocence.

But Pilate was saying to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him!" (15:14)

Pilate makes a final attempt to save Jesus, but the crowd, now in a riotous frenzy, is beyond reason, revealing not Jesus' supposed crimes but their original intentions and motives: "Crucify Him!"

And wishing to satisfy the multitude, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him to be crucified. (15:15)

Pilate could not change their minds. He had no choice but to go through with it. He released the murderer Barabbas, and delivered Jesus over to be crucified. But first he had him flogged. "Among the Jews scourging was limited to forty lashes, but the Romans were restricted by nothing but their strength and whim."⁹ Few victims survived the dreaded *flagellum*, a whip of leather thongs well laced with pieces of sharp metal and bone, designed to cut deep. First, the victim was stripped and tied to a post. Then came the torture. One doctor tried to convey the brutality of flogging in medical terms:

The heavy whip is brought down with full force again and again across Jesus' shoulder, back and legs. At first the heavy thongs cut through the skin only. Then, as the blows continue, they cut deeper into the subcutaneous tissues, producing first an oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins of the skin, and finally spurting arterial bleeding from veins in the underlying muscles...Finally the skin of the back is hanging in long ribbons and the entire area is an unrecognizable mass of torn, bleeding tissue.¹⁰

In the ripping raw of Jesus' flesh, Pilate made sure there would be no future complaint against him to Rome—and perhaps by a slim chance, the chief priests might take pity on Jesus and not crucify an innocent man. Such were Pilate's menial motives. The Son of the Father is left a mangled mass of bleeding flesh. Sadly, this one encounter with Jesus had no impact on Pilate. More rapacious crimes forced him out of office. His life went from bad to worse. Eusebius says that "Pilate himself was involved in such calamities that he was forced to become his own executioner and to punish himself with his own hand: divine justice, it seems, was not slow to overtake him."¹¹ Pilate took his own life.

IV. By His Scourging We Are Healed

What can we learn from this story? As Jesus steps closer and closer towards the cross, the approaching night of sin seems to grow darker and colder. No disciples, no supporters of any kind remain. The cold, cruel government rulers, both religious and civil, seem to have a free hand to carry out their despicable whims. Their actions grip us in horror as we try to comprehend the meaning of evil let loose without restraint. But faith sees through the darkness to the mystery of salvation.

First, there are the chief priests, whom Mark does not mention by name. They appear totally successful in their evil plots, and in this critical hour are surprisingly capable of manipulating a powerful government with their agenda. They hate Jesus for his claim to be Messiah and his re-

fusal to fulfill their expectations to overthrow Rome, yet they have him indicted for seditious actions against Rome. Pilate has no interest in helping them.

In the past, Pilate consistently walked all over them, but now, even after being warned by his wife to stay away from this case, he has to play into their hand. The nature of the charges demands that he try the case. Finding Jesus innocent and offering to release him, he is further manipulated to release Barabbas instead. Pushed to edge of job security over justice, he performs the historic "great exchange." A harmless itinerant rabbi will die in the place of a bloody terrorist. Barabbas will live, while Jesus will be crucified.

What does Barabbas represent in this story? The answer is quite clear: he is the "son of the father" (i.e. a rabbi), raised to worship at the feet of Yahweh, now turned bloody terrorist, condemned for multiple murders. Isn't that a microcosm of the story of Israel? As Jesus is raised up on that tree and numbered among *these* transgressors, we discover that the cross is at its very heart a mirror to Israel of what she had become and had now in fact condemned. This is as biting as the prophet Nathan's charge to David, "You are the man!" (2 Sam 12:7) Is this what God would have us learn? The wretchedness of our sin, which we cannot see, yet we so easily project on innocent others and then vehemently condemn them? Yes. The cross becomes a mirror of our own sin.

Isaiah wrote:

***Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God and afflicted. (Isa 53:4)***

Then there is Pilate, the political powerhouse who stood at the crossroads of two worlds, Israel and Rome. At this hour he is striding on a stage where he does not wish to be. Ruling over this rabbi was not something he wanted to do. He knew that evil motives were at play. Jesus' answers to his questions betray a profound simplicity and a confident silence that is frightening. There is an attractiveness about this rabbi that Pilate has never encountered before. Who is this man? He can't be sure, but he knows that whatever Jesus has done is not worthy of death, and his wife's dream echoes the warnings in his mind. So he looks for a way out. Sadly, it is a way out that lacks cost or commitment. He cannot bring himself to overrule the Jews again; that would not look good to Rome. Job security was more important than the truth. This was one time when it was right to assert his authority over the Jews, but it was the one time he could not do it. In the process, the greatest injustice in history was perpetrated. Truly, this was the great exchange.

Pilate grants amnesty to a terrorist in exchange for the Son of God. To take the edge off the whole affair, flogs Jesus' skin off, turns his back and walks away. Surely this was evil at its worst. But God's purposes were infinitely larger.

***The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by his scourging we are healed. (Isa 53:5)***

By his stripes, those blows that cut deep into his flesh, we are healed. So Pilate performed a historic function that made possible all of our holy health and *shalom* peace. So

deep is the cancer of our sin, forgiveness could not be granted without the shedding of blood. But notice, it is not a clean death. The wounds gouge deep. Nerves sting and raw pain screams. Blood oozes out over raw flesh, thirty-nine times over. Stare deeply and you will come to understand a God who will not compromise his severe holiness or quench his unrelenting love. By his scourging we are healed.

*Beneath the cross of Jesus
I fain would take my stand –
The shadow of a mighty rock
within a weary land...
O safe and happy shelter!
O refuge tried and sweet!
O trysting-place, where heaven's love
And heaven's justice meet!*

Finally, we see the way of the Lamb. Mark contrasts Pilate's pitiful compromise with the silent confidence of the Lamb. Here we see *how* the sacrificial fight is waged and won. Fortified by the prayers of the night, Jesus allows himself to be bound like a sacrificial lamb. When he is asked to speak, his two words of defense muster an ocean of truth. For the remainder he is silent. It is a majestic silence.

***He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth. (Isa 53:7)***

Once he committed himself to this way, he refused to resist or complain. That silence speaks of the obedience that secured our salvation. And the apostles hold it up to us to spur us on to a holy life:

let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons,

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprovved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives” (Heb 12:2-5)

May God grant us the grace to follow the way of the Lamb. Amen.

1. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus in Jerusalem, his first and last day in Judea*, (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin, 1996) 119.
2. C.F.D. Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge, 1965) 124.
3. I am indebted to Pixner, 117, for these thoughts.
4. R.T. France, *Mark* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 196.
5. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 139.
6. D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 568.
7. Carson.
8. This is Carson's suggestion.
9. Carson, 571.
10. C. Truman David, “The Crucifixion of Jesus. The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View,” *Arizona Medicine* 22:3 (March 1965) 185, quoted by Wessel in “Mark,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 775.
11. Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, translated by G. A. Williamson (Penguin Books, 1965) 43.

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CRUCIFIED!

Catalog No. 1145
 Mark 15:16-32
 44th Message
 Mark Bucko
 June 18th, 2000

I. Introduction

On a warm spring night in 1972, Jesus Christ invaded my life. As I lay on my bed, wide awake, the glow of a nearby streetlight filtering in through my window, I suddenly was intensely and soberly aware that God was calling me to give him my heart and my life. I didn't know why. I didn't fully understand what was happening to me. But I knew very deeply that God was real and he was calling me to commit my life to Jesus. It was truly a surprise invasion.

Having grown up in the Baptist church, the natural thing for me to decide was to go forward in church the following Sunday. At the end of every service an altar call was given, and this time I knew I was one whom God was calling. So, without telling my parents or anyone beforehand, when my pastor gave the invitation, heart pounding and palms sweaty, I got up and went forward. The organ swelled and the congregation sang as I walked to the front. There in front of me, my pastor, Emory Campbell, stretched out his arms. He leaned forward to hear my voice.

As he did, I began to weep. After choking out the fact that I wanted to give my life to Jesus, I continued to weep. Five, ten minutes passed and still I wept. The poor deacon assigned to take me aside and talk with me didn't quite know what to do with me.

It took nearly two decades before I finally understood why I wept that day, two decades of reflection on that turning point of my life to understand what was happening in my soul.

In our study of Mark today, our drama comes to an astounding and shocking crescendo, in which much of our Lord's life and ministry is completed. In this passage we see the completion of the circle of denial and abandonment of Jesus; we see Jesus as the truly complete Suffering Servant, and we see the completion of judgement upon the Jewish nation and religious hierarchy, the very ones who should have heralded the coming of Messiah.

The tension of the passion week has built to the bursting point, particularly as we have seen in the last two studies through the trial of Jesus and the simultaneous cross-examination of Peter, in which we found the story of our own fearful and faithless hearts.

That scene was followed by Jesus' hearing before Pilate, in which the people rejected his desire to release Jesus, instead choosing the violent insurrectionist Ba-

rabbas who, as we have seen, represented what Israel had become. We now find ourselves in the midst of unrestrained evil. Jesus has no one to give comfort, to ease the searing pain.

This now leaves us at the threshold of history's most profound injustice, an act so remarkable and outrageous that when we stop and truly, carefully consider what occurred, we must pause and ask: Why? Why did this happen? Did it have to happen? Did it have to happen this way? What does it mean for us? Why do we study it, consider it, remember it? Does it really have relevance to us in 2000, in this enlightened, post-modern age where information flows at startling rates and billions of dollars change hands each minute? What bearing does this have when there are products to be developed; IPOs to be executed; college educations to be planned; playoffs to be played; concerts to be performed; homeless to be cared for; mission trips to be taken, life to be lived?

Why should we care what happened to this non-violent revolutionary, calling himself a king, yet being clandestinely tried and brutally killed on a Roman cross?

II. The Completed Circle of Denial – All Humanity Drawn Together to Put Christ on the Cross (15:16-20)

And the soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort. And they dressed Him up in purple, and after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on Him; and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews." And they kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting at Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him. And after they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, and put His garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him. (Mark 15:16-20, NASB)

The first thing to note is that at this point in the drama, the Sanhedrin (the high priest, the chief priests, the elders and teachers of the law) have lost their voice. Two weeks ago, when we studied chapter 14:64-65, Mark quoted the Sanhedrin: "You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?" And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death. And some began to spit at Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him with their fists, and to say to Him, 'Prophecy!' And the officers received Him with slaps in the face." From this

point, Mark records their actions but gives them no words. They have no voice in the story. I would offer that Mark has taken away their voice because the limits of their power have been reached. They no longer have voice, only swift, desperate actions.

We then noted that the heinous mocking and beating of Jesus by the Sanhedrin and their guard was quickly followed by Peter's denial. Peter, indeed all mankind, stood in the courtyard and denied our Lord. The circle of rejection widened. The chorus of denial was then joined by the crowds of Jerusalem: "Crucify Him!" they screamed.

Now, in verses 16-20 of chapter 15, we see the circle of rejection and denial completed as the Roman soldiers to whom Jesus is handed over mimic the Jewish religious hierarchy. They spat upon Jesus and beat him, just as their polar opposite counterparts, the Sanhedrin.

The rejection of the very Son of God is complete. Notice what Mark has done. From the Jewish high priest to the pagan Roman soldiers, from Jesus' intimate friends to the crowds of common people gathered in Jerusalem, all of them reject Jesus. Mark has woven his account of these events to show the world symbolically united, hated enemies arm in arm, to reject, mock, and deny the very Son of God.

What does this mean for us? Why do we study the crucifixion? First of all, we see the disturbing reality that we are a part of this wicked chorus. Our sin, our rebelliousness, our selfishness give us no choice but to be included in this hideous song. We cannot escape that reality. Isaiah makes no distinction among people when he says, in chapter 53: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

If any of us hold to the notion that it was the Jews who crucified Jesus, then we are terribly misled. Mark makes it clear that all mankind drove Jesus to the cross. The amazing reality is that as true as this is, he went willingly and as a part of his Father's method to fulfill justice and extend mercy to his creation. Indeed, we denied him, and beat him, and spat upon him. And indeed he suffered the full measure of the wrath of God on our behalf.

III. The Complete Suffering Servant (15:21-24)

And they pressed into service a passerby coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), that he might bear His cross. And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. And they tried to give him wine mixed with myrrh; but He did not take it. And they crucified Him, and divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. (Mark 15:21-24)

Suddenly, into the scene enters an unknown, common man who is thrust to center stage. Simon, a Cyre-

nean Jew, is on his way into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Hurrying along, he nervously anticipates the preparations necessary for himself and his family. He mentally reviews his grocery and supply list, all of which must be completed before sundown. At the city gate, Simon finds himself in the midst of a crush of people and animals. Suddenly, a disturbance ahead gives way to a clearing of people. Simon anxiously looks around, wondering if he will make it on time.

As he scans the scene, his eyes fall on an imposing Roman centurion, pointing at him. "Me?" "Yes, you." Then Simon understands, as before him is a beaten and bloodied man stumbling, now falling, his raw wounds mixing with the dry dust of the road. In a flurry of moments, Simon is forced to pick up the large wooden beam, which this condemned and dying man can no longer carry. Confused and scared, Simon obeys. To object would be pointless.

I wonder how long it was before Simon understood that day's events. Jesus invaded his life on that day, in that moment. Mark zooms his camera in on this Cyrenean peasant, tells us his name and gives us the names of his sons, so that there will be no doubt as to who this is. Fascinating detail, isn't it?

The most amazing thing about these verses, however, is the description of the actual crucifixion. A mere four words in the English; in the Greek, three words, two if we take out the "and." Isn't this amazing? Mark gives the actual crucifixion of Jesus only two words. Now, this tells us something. The crucifixion itself, as horrific as the act was, is not the core of what Mark is communicating. It is those activities occurring around the crucifixion on which he wants us to focus.

Lest we whitewash the reality of this form of capital punishment, I quote to you excerpts from Walter Wessel's commentary on Mark as he quotes from Davis' *Crucifixion of Jesus*:

As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward... Air can be drawn into the lungs, but cannot be exhaled... Hours of limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as tissue is torn from his lacerated back as He moves up and down against the rough timber. Then, another agony begins. A deep crushing pain deep in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart... tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air...¹

It's unbearable isn't it? It's as difficult for me to read to you now as it was for me to read the first time. But, the amazing thing is, Mark only gives it two words.

The actual crucifixion is almost a sidebar, a footnote to the story. I would offer that this is because we are to be struck not by the horrific reality of the act of crucifixion, but instead by the fact that the very Son of God

willingly took it on. He willingly experienced the utter depths of shame, abuse and pain in order to take the wrath that was due each one of us.

Jesus was the complete Suffering Servant. He took it all. Physically, he took the pain — pain and abuse that defies description. Mentally, he took the shame, the embarrassment, the derision, the mocking of mankind. The Creator submitted to utter humiliation from the created. Mark tells us that the soldiers rolled dice to determine who would get Jesus' garments. Oh, the humiliation. Roman soldiers cavalierly dividing up the garments of the perfect, complete, Suffering Servant, the Messiah, Son of God. Spiritually, he underwent the ultimate horror: complete rejection by his Father, YHWH, the great "I AM." The Lord of Lords turns his back on his Son.

Why do we study and consider the crucifixion? Because he was the perfect, complete Suffering Servant.

In the end, Mark leaves no doubt in our minds as to the magnitude of agony undergone by our Lord. Beginning to end, he suffered in every way. It was unspeakable agony from which he could have escaped. Yet he endured it for you... and for me.

IV. The Completion of Judgement (15:25-32)

And it was the third hour when they crucified Him. And the inscription of the charge against Him read, "THE KING OF THE JEWS." And they crucified two robbers with Him, one on the right and one on the left. And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads and saying, "Ha! You were going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests along with the scribes were also mocking Him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!" And those who were crucified with Him were casting the same insult at Him. (Mark 15:25-32)

Mark now brings us full circle, back to Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin. We see that the abuse of the trial continues, unabated, even now that Jesus is on the cross.

Reentering the scene now are the chief priests and the teachers of the law. These leaders of Israel have observed an astonishing series of events. And, the fact of the matter is, despite their trial and conviction of Jesus, they still have a chance to save themselves and their people.

Jesus has made it clear that temple destruction was imminent. He gave every clue to them that the physical temple was no longer the dwelling place of God on earth, and that it was doomed because of Israel's sin and rebellion. But Jesus was willing to become that temple and take the destruction upon himself: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19).

Tom Wright, in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, says: "... [Jesus] announced the end of the present evil age... and the reconstruction of the people of YHWH on a basis that would leave no future role for the temple. Jesus... told the second temple story of the suffering and exile of the people of YHWH in a new form, and proceeded to act it out, finding himself called... to undergo the fate that he announced, in symbol and word, for Jerusalem as a whole."

The temple had become the epicenter of activity for a future, armed rebellion. The Sanhedrin, rather than walk in humility and service to the Lord, providing light to the nations, instead chose to take on the methods of their hated oppressors. Armed rebellion had replaced fear of the Lord. A passion for throwing off Rome had replaced their passion for God. Control, power and influence were their gods.

And now the chief priests and teachers of the law have a choice. They have a final opportunity to recognize their depravity and recognize the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice.

For the first time since the trial, the Jewish religious establishment has a voice again. And what do they do with it? Mark tells us "they mock." In the same way as the passersby, they mock. Their doom is sealed. The true temple has been destroyed, to be raised again on the third day. The true temple, the perfect and complete sacrifice is doing his work, taking on the death and destruction promised a chosen but rebellious people, and they are missing it! Indeed, within a generation, the physical temple was destroyed. Rome, under the leadership of Emperor Titus, sacked and utterly destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The very ones who should have recognized Messiah, are the very ones who mock the most.

So now, as the Suffering Servant completes his sacrifice, Mark brings us back full circle to complete the judgement. The scene has moved from the kangaroo court of the Sanhedrin, in which they mock the Son of God, to the courtroom of heaven, in which they plead guilty by mocking yet again. By book ending these scenes with their mockery, Mark shows us the completion of judgement upon the Jewish religious hierarchy.

V. Summary and Exhortation

So, Mark shows why it had to happen this way. God then takes this moment and makes it the center point of history. He uses the very device of our crucifixion of the Messiah to become the very device by which our sins are righteously and justly dealt with. There is not one among us who, left to ourselves, will not reject the living one who created us. Our sin runs so deep, our selfishness so pervasive, our rebelliousness so thorough that no earthly device can save us.

Why did the crucifixion have to occur?

We all, because of God's mercy, had to be gathered to participate in this horrific drama. Rejection was complete. Jesus, the perfect Suffering Servant, became the

presence of God on earth. He became the temple of God and took on the fate of the physical temple in order to save its inhabitants, and indeed all mankind. He took on our fate. Will we mock? Or will we fall to our knees in humility?

In the crucifixion, perfect and complete justice was rendered on our behalf. Without it, there is no justice. Without it, there is no mercy. Without it, there is no victory. Without it, there is no life.

Tom Wright says: Jesus went to the cross in the ultimate act of “turning the other cheek, going the second mile.” He exposed his whole body, carried the whole load of sin and decay, and the judgement it deserves. Through this act, Jesus fulfills Israel’s destiny to save the world. The cross, the ultimate symbol of helplessness and shame, becomes the symbol of victory over Satan.

Beaten and bloodied, Jesus invaded Simon’s world. Too weak to do what the convicted had to do, Jesus wouldn’t have made it. He had already endured far more than what it would take to kill most of us. But yet there was more. And rather than call down a legion of angels to rescue him, Jesus pressed on, the complete Suffering Servant. And in the midst of it all he invades Simon’s life. Evidence suggests that Simon was a believer, as his sons are specifically mentioned by both Mark and Matthew, and Paul greets Rufus by name in his letter to the Romans. Mark leaves no doubt as to exactly which Simon this is: *the* Simon, the one they all knew!

I would offer that Simon is us. As we scurry about, busying ourselves with the concerns of the world, Jesus invades our lives. God in his mercy and grace pulls us aside and makes us a part of this great drama. And in doing so, he covers us in his complete justice. We gather together to condemn the Son of God; he responds by being the perfect Suffering Servant, becoming the lamb led to slaughter to pay the price of our depravity.

Why did I weep that day in 1972? Nearly 20 years later, I finally understood. Though I didn’t know it then, I wept that day because I put Jesus on the cross. I wept that day because I knew the sin and decay in my heart, even as an 11-year-old. I wept that day because my soul sensed the magnitude of what happened 2000 years ago, even though it was far beyond my mental understanding.

I wept that day because God in his infinite mercy invaded my life. He lifted from me the mantle of judgement, and put it on his Son.

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1. Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 767.



HOLY DEATH

Catalog No. 1146
 Mark 15:33-47
 45th Message
 Brian Morgan
 June 25th, 2000

We come now to one of the holiest of texts in Scripture. In these verses from the gospel of Mark we become witnesses to the death of the Son, and the result of that death, our own salvation. But, more importantly, this text bears the Father's testimony to the significance of the death of his beloved Son. Unlike Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, however, this is a testimony without words. The Father has no voice in it. Perhaps it is because there are no words to articulate a father's grief. But, though the Father is drowning in tears and robbed of a voice, he does not fail to act. The moment his Son expends his final breath he moves into swift, decisive action, using all his sovereign power to tell the world what he thinks of his boy.

In that scene around the cross we behold a universe in miniature: a Father, a Son, the crowd of onlookers, soldiers, a centurion, Pilate, two Marys, and one Joseph. This circle of relationships will give shape to our most intimate cries, and set the direction for the history of the coming kingdom. Let us linger long here and gaze deeply, using every vestige of our imagination to enter in. If we grasp what is transpiring, we will have a map that possesses the largest bearings. So, let us stay until the credits are over and the music resonates in our souls. At the center we will find a love that draws us to a place called home.

I. The Son's Cry (Mark 15:33-34)

And when the sixth hour had come, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:33-34, NASB)

As Jesus is crucified, a bleeding, eerie darkness, lasting from noon until three o'clock, descends over that part of the world. Whether this was due to an eclipse or the famed *sirocco* wind that comes from the desert and blackens the sky, Mark doesn't say. He is not as concerned with the source of the darkness as he is its significance. It is a sign from heaven: creation's attempt to groan out its fathomless sorrow at this cruel hour. Perhaps it is a mirror of the Father's abandonment of the Son, a forced turning away of his presence and support at the hour when his precious boy is being made sin. We know how the Son felt at this time, because he tells us, but we do not know how the Father felt; he never tells us. Words cannot express his feelings. David's stammering cries come close (2 Sam 18:33¹), but even those are inadequate. Stricken by sorrow, the Father's voice is seized shut. He cannot speak. But he acts. Mute with grief, he summons the creation to give him a voice. Feeling the frozen darkness hover over the cross, Amos' words come ringing right out of the seventh century B.C.:

**"And it will come about in that day," declares the Lord GOD,
 "That I shall make the sun go down at noon,
 And make the earth dark in broad daylight.
 Then I shall turn your festivals in mourning...
 And I will make it like a time of mourning of an only son,
 And the end of it will be like a bitter day."
 (Amos 8:9-10)**

Jesus endured three hours of dark abandonment in an agony that none of us can comprehend. So sensitive is my soul, I collapse when the warmth of God's grace seems to be blocked for just a few hours (Psa 30:7). But it always returns, as faithful as the sunrise. But for Jesus, those three endless hours compressed a comprehensive and eternal separation that we will never understand. And when he could bear it no more, he seized all of his strength to speak yet once more to his Father, crying, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!*" These words are the Aramaic translation of David's opening cry of desolation in Psalm 22. A mere four words, they capture everything that was happening in Jesus' heaving soul, evoking the memory of the whole psalm. We may never plumb the depths of that cry, but the poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, makes a significant reach:

*Deserted! God cold separate from his own essence rather;
 And Adam's sins have swept between the righteous Son and
 Father.
 Yea, once, Immanuel's orphan'd cry his universe hath shaken-
 It went up since, echoless, "My God, I am forsaken!"
 (From "Cowper's Grave")*

In his darkest hour, Jesus follows the practice of his whole life: he prays to his Father. It is fitting that, as was his custom, he found appropriate words from the psalms. David's verses give shape to his seething emotions, bringing them to the surface with a raw honesty and a defining clarity. Four words of Israel's first poet-king now seized by the lips of Israel's final king. Four words anchor Jesus to his past and forge his future, piercing the black, iron-clad sky and thrusting the abandoned orphan back to the Father's side. May we make them our prayers; then we, too, will have a voice in the darkness. How privileged we are to hear such words uttered in this rare glimpse of intimacy between Father and Son.

Sadly, however, they are lost to those standing around the cross. They are unable to enter in.

II. The Bystanders Mocking (Mark 15:35-39)

And when some of the bystanders heard it, they began saying, "Behold, He is calling for Elijah." And some one ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink, saying, "Leave me alone, let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down." (Mark 15:35-39)

Those standing around mistake Jesus' cry, "Eloi, Eloi," for a cry to Elijah. The prophet was long considered to be the forerunner and helper to the Messiah (Mal 4:5). Hearing the term *Eloi*, one of the bystanders, presumably a soldier, turns Jesus' cry into a cruel joke. He fills a sponge with sour wine diluted with vinegar, a mixture that was drunk by the foot soldiers, in order to sedate Jesus and prolong his life. Gould's paraphrase catches the meaning of this: "Let me give him this, and so prolong his life, and then we shall get an opportunity to see whether Elijah comes to help him or not."² Apparently, some of the bystanders, disgusted by such a display of wanton cruelty, tried to prevent the soldier from doing this, but he responded, "Leave me alone," and persisted in carrying out his taunt: "Let's see whether Elijah comes to take him down." How ironic. At the end of the story there is the same confusion over the appearance of Elijah and his relation to Messiah as there was at the beginning. The striking difference is that now the confusion is turned into a terrible taunt: "Sedate him with vinegar to see if Elijah will help him." In the background we can hear the voice of David, more alive than ever,

**They gave me gall for my food,
and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.** (Psa 69:21)

Strengthened by his prayer, Jesus refuses to play the game, choosing not to prolong his life. He knows that his hour has come; no further work remained to be done.

III. The Centurion's Confession (Mark 15:37-39)

And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last. And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:37-39)

Refusing to drink the cheap sedative, Jesus cries out with all his remaining strength. According to John, the cry was the voice of triumph: "It is finished!" (John 19:30). These words startled and shook the earth, broke open tombs (Matt 27:51-53), and rent the veil that separated the holy place from the holy of holies. Jerusalem's temple, which once served as a shadow of the dwelling of God among men, is now transformed and transcended by the body of Christ. Access to the holy throne room, which had been denied to most, and so carefully guarded and relegated to but one, is now thrown open wide as Jesus' blood flows freely from that tree. It is finished. Redemption is complete. The eternal Sabbath for which all creation had waited has now begun. From this point on, time would forever be invaded by eternity.

As Jesus gives up his spirit, the centurion who commanded the death squad is watching intently. Facing Jesus, he is seized with a bolt of fear, and makes the startling confession, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" Mark's gospel has been building to this grand climax. The very words which the Father spoke from heaven at Jesus' baptism, "You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased" (1:11), finally are echoed on earth. But strangely, they come not from a Jewish disciple but a Roman soldier, not from a friend but an enemy. He is the first to fit all the pieces together.

Peter, of course, was the first to make the confession that Jesus was Messiah, but had no idea of what that meant. From that point forward (Mark 8:31), Jesus spent the rest of his ministry teaching the disciples "the way" of the Messiah. His would not be a rule of force to destroy Rome, but one of submission to death at the hands of the conquerors. He taught them that the glorious Son of Man of Daniel was to be the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Yet throughout the story, despite three direct predictions of his sufferings, the disciples were unable to understand. Now, when the climactic moment has arrived, they don't even see it, for they all had fled. Yet the witness comes. How strange and mysterious that the first one in Mark's story to comprehend everything is the brutal commander of the death squad, a man devoid of religious training. But on that day all it takes is one look at the cross and his voice breaks forth with angelic revelation (perhaps symbolized by the renting of the veil), confessing that this man, this suffering servant, through death is King Messiah.

Our story has come full circle. Beginning with the heavens rent, and the Father's confession about the Son as the Spirit enters Jesus at his baptism, it ends now with the temple curtain rent and the centurion's confession as Jesus gives up his spirit. Notice that at both the beginning and the end the mysterious name Elijah resonates in the text.

Moving from the centurion's amazing witness, Mark now directs our gaze to several women around the cross.

IV. The Mothers' Silent Grief (Mark 15:40-42)

And there were also some women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. And when He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister to Him; and there were many other women who had come up with Him to Jerusalem. (Mark 15:40-42)

Unlike the bystanders who mock Jesus up close, these women must gaze from a distance. But the greater contrast to the unnamed bystanders is that these women, who are personally named, arrive on the scene with a caring grief that is characteristic of mothers. We can't fail to catch the theme of motherhood: we hear "Mary" twice and "mother" once. These women had cared for the personal needs and expenses of Jesus out of their own funds (Luke 8:2,3). Behind these three is a small army of women, devoted followers of the Lord. Though they are powerless to do anything they are still there at the cross. Though they are forced to remain at a distance they will not leave the bleeding boy. This is a mother's greatest gift. In our deepest grief what we long for most is a mother's presence. Here, at the hinge of history, these mothers gaze to the bitter end, grieving over a dead Son.

Following the centurion's confession and the mothers' gaze, Mark says there is still more devotion to follow.

V. A Father's Dying Devotion (Mark 14:42-46)

And when evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. And Pi-

late wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. And Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus were looking on to see where He was laid. (Mark 14:42-46)

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 reads:

“And if a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the Lord your GOD gives you as an inheritance.” (Deut 21:22-23)

But, Carson explains: “The Roman custom was to let bodies of the crucified criminals hang in full view till they rotted away. If they were buried at all, it was only by express permission of the imperial magistrate. Such permission was usually granted to friends and relatives of the deceased who made application, but never in the case of high treason.”³

Will Jesus be left to rot on a tree? With the approach of evening and the Sabbath, a prominent leader among the Sanhedrin takes the stage. We learn from Luke and Matthew that this wealthy man, Joseph of Arimathea, had become a disciple of Jesus. Not consenting to the action of the council, what followed must have caused him unbearable sorrow, so much so that his heart was moved to risk everything — money, reputation, perhaps even his life — to provide a proper burial for Jesus. He musters up all his courage and goes to face Jesus’ executioner, Pilate, to ask for the body. Pilate, amazed to hear that Jesus was already dead, seeks confirmation from the centurion. For a second time the centurion bears witness to his death, and permission is miraculously granted.

The wealthy Joseph was the owner of a new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. John records that with the help of another Jewish leader, Nicodemus, they took the body of Jesus down from the cross. They washed it, prepared it with about seventy-five pounds of precious spices, and then wrapped it in an expensive linen cloth. What emotions they felt we can only imagine. They then took Jesus’ body and laid it in the tomb, in probably what is now the site of the church of the Holy Sepulchre. Again, Carson fills in the background,

Some centuries earlier the place had been a stone quarry, and the resulting rugged face became a place where tombs were cut from the rock. Joseph had prepared this tomb for his own use, but now he laid Jesus’ body in it. Tombs were of various kinds. Many were sealed with some sort of boulder wedged into place to discourage wild animals and grave robbers. But an expensive tomb consisted of an antechamber hewn out of the rock face, with a low passage leading into the burial chamber that was sealed with a cut, disk-shaped stone that rolled in a slot cut into the rock. The slot was on an incline, making the grave easy to seal but difficult to open.⁴

As the men carry out every holy procedure, behind them are the women. Roman law prohibited mourning for executed criminals; mourners could only watch in silent grief. But watch they did, until the burial was complete. And with it the eternal Sabbath begins.

We are struck by two things: how Mark has carefully crafted everything that went on around the cross, and second, the depths of the Father’s love. The first enlightens the mind, the second moves the heart.

VI. Holy Death

A. A Map of the Coming Kingdom

Observing how Mark shapes the story, it appears that what occurred around the cross was a foretaste, a miniature map of the coming kingdom of God. It, too, began with the creation’s witness (Acts 2:6). The same Spirit that left Jesus and rent the veil of the Temple as it returned to heaven again shakes the Temple on Pentecost, this time filling seventy disciples; and the church becomes the body of Christ possessed and animated by his very Spirit. Without the Spirit we are nothing. And at that hour there was also the same confusion and mocking to the witness of the Spirit as there was at the cross. That will never change. The crowds will always mock, but that will not impede the advance of God’s rule.

In the centurion’s confession we also get a preview that in the coming kingdom gentiles, of all people, will come to faith — and they will do so with seemingly little preparation and training. Even former enemies will comprehend easily and attain what the Jews worked so hard for but rarely achieved. So we discover that wherever the apostle Paul traveled he found a greater response to the gospel among gentiles than Jews. Even at the end of his life the imprisoned apostle had a dramatic influence among Caesar’s elite Praetorian Guard (Phil 4:22). And thus in the mystery of the kingdom, God will give his voice of witness to the Gentiles to make the Jews jealous (Rom 11:11).

From the centurion we turn to the sea of faithful women staring in silent grief. Unlike the disciples, they were not driven off in fear. They will be first to bear the news of the resurrection to a group of doubting males. Perhaps this is an indicator of the enhanced role which women would play in the age of the Spirit. They seem to burst on the scene with fearless faith and prepared hands, giving birth to large things. It is no coincidence that nearly every significant ministry here at our church was started by a woman. One of the latest, envisioned by Karin Stahl, has given birth to a whole city of faith in Guatemala.

And then we behold Joseph, the final figure around the tree. With this leading Jew we have come full circle. Perhaps he is a sign that God will not give up on his people. Thus the gospel story has as its defining shape the Jew first, then the Gentile, and finally, the Jew.⁵ And in the end, when they “look upon him whom they have pierced,” they will be moved as Joseph of Arimathea was and serve the Lord at great personal cost. I see indicators of that already in the Jewish believers I know. Like Joseph, many of them are wealthy, yet they give abundantly out those riches to serve the Son whom they love. The rejection of their families is often costly, making their devotion as dear as when Joseph washed Jesus’ bloody back and laid him in his own tomb.

Here then at the cross we find our map for the coming kingdom of God. But even more importantly, our text reveals much about the devotion of the Father to the Son, and by implication, the kind of devotion we owe to the Son.

B. The Devotion of the Father to the Son

As we saw in our last study, Mark makes use of very few words to describe the actual crucifixion. But, when we come to the impact of Jesus' death, his words explode with emotion. What was it like for the Father to abandon his boy and walk away while Jesus was being tortured at the hands of the Romans? We will never know. He veiled his weeping in the dark. Perhaps it would have been too much for our humanity to bear. It might even have inhibited our freedom to respond to his love. What we do know is that at the moment when Jesus cried, "*It is finished*," God moved swiftly to action and speedily answered his beloved boy's cry. Abandon he must, but not for long. He will not wait for the resurrection to vindicate his Son. The moment he exhales his last breath, creation explodes and quakes, and the curtain of the old temple is torn asunder in a sign that the new one is at hand. In the place of a Father's forced abandonment and the nameless, mocking crowd we hear the names Mary and Joseph coming on the horizon like a lost mother and father. And it is not just one Mary but two, with a small army of mothers in their wake. And it is not just any Joseph but the most prominent Joseph in the land. In the holy presence of a surrogate father and a sea of mothers, Jesus receives a burial fit for a king, Messiah King. The Father who cannot leave his throne sends an army of mothers and a most distinguished father to care for his orphaned son.

What makes the devotion so beautiful is that it none of it is planned. It is all spontaneous, coming right from the heart.

How different this was from Herod the Great, who slaughtered the infant children in a sea of blood in Bethlehem. Herod longed for a grand display of devotion upon his death, so he prearranged everything. He built a mountain about three miles from Jesus' birthplace. There weren't any natural hills large enough, so he made his own. On top of this huge volcano-like structure he built one of

his seven palaces. He named it *Herodiun*, after himself. That was where that he would be buried. Then he prearranged his own funeral, with color guard and military escort. To ensure people would be weeping rather than applauding at his funeral, he ordered all the leading Jewish elders arrested and placed in the Jericho Hippodrome. At the moment of his death they were to be executed. Sadly for him, but fortunately for them, his orders were not carried out.⁶

Unlike Herod, Jesus had no ability to arrange for his funeral, yet observe its display of costly and courageous, extravagant devotion. In its uninhibited display the Father is demonstrating the kind of love he wants to give us. When we are mired in the deepest grief, God sends a sea of mothers and fathers to be his tender hands and weeping eyes. And when we look into those eyes we are touching the very tears of God, and they in turn are staring into the eyes of the Son. Is it no wonder that when we gaze into the heart of the cross we find an unquenchable love that draws us to a place called home. Perhaps this is why Paul said to the Corinthians, "*For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified*" (1 Cor 2:2). Amen.

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1. "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam 18:33)

2. Quoted by Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 783.

3. The words of the Father in Mark 1:11 are a combination of three texts, Psa 2:7, Gen 22:2, and Isa 42:1. By placing these three texts together, the Father at the very outset is saying, "This one is the King, but the way he will become King is through death."

4. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 584.

5. Carson.

6. This paragraph on Herod was taken from Eugene Peterson's lectures on *Leadership*, given at Regent College, May 2000. Also supplemented by the Anchor Bible Dictionary.



A TREMOR OF BLISS

Catalog No. 1147

Mark 16:1-8

46th Message

Brian Morgan

July 2nd, 2000

We come now to the climax of Mark's gospel, the glorious resurrection of Jesus. Walter Wessel writes:

The climax to Mark's Gospel is the Resurrection. Without it the life and death of Jesus, though noble and admirable, are nonetheless overwhelmingly tragic events. With it Jesus is declared to be the Son of God with power (Rom 1:4), and the disciples are transformed from lethargic and defeated followers into the flaming witnesses of the Book of Acts. The Good News about Jesus Christ is that God, by the resurrection of Jesus, defeated sin, death, and hell. It was this message that lay at the heart of the apostolic preaching.¹

We are privileged to have arrived at Mark's account of that resurrection. He was the first to document the event, and he does so with profound simplicity and restraint, that we might enter in.

I. The Text of the Resurrection (Mark 16:1-8)

And when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. And very early on the first day of the week (*sabbath*), they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at the right, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you.'" And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:1-8, NASB)

II. The Story of the Resurrection

Corpses rapidly decay in the hot climate of Palestine, so promptly at 6 p.m., at Sabbath's end, the women who observed the crucifixion and grieved in silent sorrow, went to purchase more aromatic spices to anoint Jesus' body. As Wessel states: "The anointing was not for the purpose of preserving the body (embalming was not practiced by the Jews), but was a single act of love and devotion probably meant to reduce the stench of the decomposing body."²

Their action appears to be an extravagant expenditure on what seems a lost cause. But, love's devotion, which is often outrageous, turns a blind eye to the practical. Ask any mother. So strong was these women's inner compul-

sion they gave no thought to cost or effort. They were driven by that necessity to expend every last drop of their grief in a tomb where the only love in their universe now lay.

But by the time their purchase was completed it was too late to make the trek outside the city walls to the tomb. Evening had fallen on this Passover night and a solemn stillness had settled over the holy city. In every home, Jewish pilgrims gathered around the table before a lamb, and a choir of Hebrew voices narrated the ancient story of Israel's miraculous deliverance from Egypt. As the voice of Exodus was recreated in every Jew's memory these three women went to bed, holding their spices. Anticipating the morning's first light, they probably slept very little. They were counting the hours in the dark.

At morning's first opportunity, when the glimmering light from the east began to break through the colored clouds in sharp shafts of light, just before sunrise, they set out for the tomb. Driven by the necessity of the hour and a rapid pace, they made good time. But when they got to the tomb, it struck them that they had not fully prepared for the obstacles they would face. The enormous stone sealing the tomb, which Joseph and Nicodemus had rolled into place down the inclined trough, would be much too heavy to roll back up the incline; and at such an early hour there would be no one there to help them. But no sooner had they finished voicing their dilemma than they looked up, and behold, the stone was rolled away.

Seizing the opportunity, they asked no questions but swiftly moved inside to give that final touch to the one they so dearly loved: to hold the hands that healed, to caress his gashed side, to wipe his thorn-studded brow, and perhaps to seal it all with a kiss on those lips that spoke as no man spoke. One last act to say goodbye, to give thanks, and to weep freely, with no restraint. We know that we must do this at death, but sadly, our culture seldom permits it. Let us be like these women, who would not be deterred from such holy acts, even though Roman law prohibited grieving over executed criminals.

Stooping into the antechamber, the women made their way through the low passageway leading to the burial chamber, expecting to find the body of Jesus resting on a stone slab hewn out of the rock. They were ill prepared for what they were about to see. To their right sat a vibrant young man, clothed in white. Mark has carefully prepared us for this event. Seeing this young man in our mind's eye, we are reminded of the other young man clothed in a white linen cloth who witnessed the arrest of Jesus (14:51-52). Though he was seized by the Roman soldiers, he escaped naked into the night, leaving his linen cloth behind. That youth was as anonymous as this young man was.

Many scholars surmise that the first young man was

Mark, but there is no doubt as to this one's identity. Matthew says that he was an angel (Matt 28:5). The first young man foreshadowed Jesus' deliverance from death by resurrection; this young man "sitting at the right" foreshadows Jesus' ascension, where he will be exalted to the right hand of God. The man's youth is a burning symbol that, following the resurrection, everything is new. The sight of all this seizes the frail hearts of the women. The young man, recognizing that they were stunned to the point of emotional overload, tries to calm them with his words. But there are no words capable of preparing minds and hearts for the event that has just happened, let alone the effect it will have on their souls:

"Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him."

The authenticity of Mark's report of the resurrection is heightened by the fact that it is succinct, calmly factual, and understated. It sounds almost as prosaic as if he were giving directions to a lost passerby: "Oh, I know the house you are looking for. They moved it across town just last week. Go three miles to the north, then take a left and you'll find it three houses on your right." This is not the kind of report the church would invent for the explosion of the resurrection. And if they had wanted to impress their world with it, they would have never identified the women as the first recipients of this earth-shattering news. Both the substance and style of the resurrection announcement would not have been an effective marketing strategy in that culture, but it is so typical of God's ways.

The angel knows why they have come and whom they are seeking. It is Jesus the Nazarene, "*the crucified one*." The perfect tense suggests the permanence of his new name. He asks, "Do you want to see Jesus? He is not here." Then he emphatically tells the women, "Behold (look, pay attention), here is the place where they laid him." The tomb was empty. It was only needed for three days and two nights, about as much time as people spend in a bed and breakfast. But before the women can catch their breath he commissions them to a holy task. They have a job to do, and must not delay. They would be the divine link between the resurrected Lord and the twelve apostles. They should return to the city, find the disciples, especially Peter, who had betrayed him, and tell them that the Lord was risen and he was on the move. Thus they would not find him in the temple, or anywhere in the precincts of Jerusalem; they had to go north, to Galilee.

As Isaiah foretold,

**Galilee of the Gentiles.
The people who walk in darkness,
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them...
And you will be glad in His presence
As with the gladness of harvest...
For you shall break the yoke of their burden...
The rod of their oppressor. (Isa 9:2-4)**

Thus Galilee became the home base for Jesus' ministry: Galilee, the center of everything personal and dear to our Lord; Galilee, the place where the New Jerusalem would be launched. Galilee is where you will find him, not Jerusalem. On my last visit to Israel I remember feeling the

contrast between these two places. In Jerusalem my soul felt strangely suffocated, while in Galilee it soared with the wind. The very air of Galilee breathes freedom.

The appearance of the angel, coupled with the sight of the empty tomb, and the announcement of the resurrection, was too much for these women. They were gripped by a fear so strong it muted them in an awful silence. This wasn't the first time that the appearance of the holy and the announcement of God's rule suffocated the hearers in silence. Holiness breeds silence, awesome silence. But though it choked out their words, it did not impede their obedient feet. They promptly delivered their kingdom orders from their commander, at full speed, like messengers running home from battle. As the dust flies in the wake of these swift-footed gazelles, we can't help but see Isaiah's words finding their true resting place:

**How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace,
And brings good news of well-being,
Who announces salvation;
Saying to Zion, "Your God reigns!"
The salvation of our God. (Isa 52:7)**

III. How Does It End?

This is where the gospel of Mark ends, with the women seized in silent fear, bringing the report of the good news to the apostles. But is it the end? Notice that the rest of the text, verses 9-20, has brackets around it, and another set of brackets around a final, shorter paragraph after verse 20. The reason for this is that the early church felt uncomfortable with such an abrupt ending to Mark's gospel. The other gospels conclude with at least one or more resurrection appearances to the twelve, a mention of Christ's ascension to his Father, climaxed by the great commission to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. But Mark's last words leave us with the women speechless in fear. Could it be that, with Peter's imprisonment, Mark was unable to complete his text, or was the last page of the autograph codex accidentally lost before it could be multiplied by the copyists.³ Or did Mark truly mean to end his gospel here?

Looking at the larger literary context of Jesus' passion (Mark 14-16), it does round off the initial section quite nicely. It begins with a woman who does not speak anointing Jesus for burial, and ends with three women who have come to anoint Jesus, fleeing and unable to speak. In any event, because the early church was uncomfortable with such an abrupt ending, they added verses 9-20 sometime between the late first century to the middle of the 2nd century. That Mark did not author these verses is clear. For one thing, they are missing in all the earliest manuscripts. Secondly, the vocabulary and style is quite foreign to Mark ("over one-third of the words are 'non-Markian'"⁴). And finally, these verses break the continuity of the narrative. A shorter ending, which also attempted to patch up Mark's ending, is found in many manuscripts by the mid-second century, but it did not gain acceptance.

For our purposes, I will conclude our text at the point where Mark's pen ceased. I will leave the longer endings for the scholars to speculate on, and commend you to study the other gospels for the authoritative views of the resurrection appearances, the ascension and great commis-

sion. Whether or not our text is complete or broken off, I find here more than adequate images for an understanding of the resurrection. For whatever reason it might have been cut short, if we let it stand as we have received it, its very incompleteness has a way of pulling us into the drama as recipients of the good news of these women. That is where I want to leave us, right in their shoes. As we reflect on them we discover the paradigm of how to enter into it. To our amazement, it is profoundly simple. It involves just three things: our feet, our speech, and our eyes.

IV. The Way of the Resurrection

Firstly, where does resurrection life begin? For these women, it began as they were being pulled into the center of a very lonely sorrow. They followed that inner compulsion and boldly marched into a grief that was cold and dark. They did not want to go, but they had to go because love and devotion drew them there. Following that compulsion, their feet took them to the tomb of Jesus. They went obediently, to love and to mourn. I would urge us not to run from sorrow or avoid those centers of grief. Plunge yourself into the center of the world's sorrow, for that is where you will find resurrection.

One of my most precious spots in the Bay Area is Alta Mesa cemetery. It is precious because many PBCC friends are buried there, especially a number of children. I visited there one morning this past spring, invited by a dear friend whose daughter died in a car accident one year ago. He set up two lawn chairs under a huge oak tree, and we sat in sacred silence before Missy's grave. Slowly, the silence was broken by a few words, then tears. I was overcome by the sense of privilege that Steve would draw me into the most sacred center of his universe. Two fathers, two daughters now sealed in sacred memory. It's taken me years to freely obey that inner compulsion to go to the center of sorrow; now I long for it. For once you are there, you are prepared to touch the edge of the horizon, life itself.

Secondly, these women took no notice of obstacles. On the way to the tomb they spoke about that insurmountable stone, set permanently in place and impossible to move. Their speech noted it, but it did not impede their feet. They kept pressing on, not knowing how it would work out. They had no plan or any human resources available. Resurrection doesn't need any. God doesn't need our help, our frail human props, our five-year strategies. In fact, he usually works before we even arrive. The obstacles that once seemed insurmountable are simply "rolled away."

Thirdly, once the women arrived their senses were stunned by what they saw. God had already acted in advance of their arrival. The stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, and at the center was an angelic vision of the risen Christ, seated at the right hand of God. And he was so young! When you taste the resurrection, the whole world is new. That is why we can never predict what is going to happen when we follow Christ; it's too full of surprises.

Fourthly, once they glimpsed this angelic vision they were in turn commissioned to be the privileged link between the resurrected Christ and the next generation of leaders. They were to tell the disciples that the Lord was on the move and they were to catch up to him in Galilee. That was where they would find him. The resurrection is not a remodel, it is a new creation. The New Temple will

not be constructed of stone on top of the old but in human hearts, to transcend the old. And it will not be a stationary building in Jerusalem, but a new temple that fills the whole creation. Thus the first connection will be in Galilee, not Jerusalem. It is a brand new beginning.

Finally, in response to what the women saw and heard, they fled in obedient fear. They could not speak yet, but they could run. Something new was at hand, something very large, something that unites creation, enlarges the horizon, and links angels, Christ, women and men into something so large it is all-encompassing. What a privilege to be part of it! Has the resurrection touched you?

As I reflected on my life in the context of the resurrection last week, I was amazed to think of how it has touched me and my home. Almost every good thing in my life, my wife, home, friends, occupation, education, and ministries, has come unplanned, as a surprising gift. And the best gifts have been unexpected treasures from the well of deepest sorrow, especially my children. When you wake in the morning, expect that the Lord is on the move ahead of you. You only have to arrive, wait and observe in order to be part of it.

June closes a very special season for Emily and me. Now that our youngest has graduated from high school, our time of being associated with Homestead High School has come to an end. I remember long before our kids went to Homestead, I would drive past the school every day and see a group of forlorn kids hanging out in front, dressed in black, with spiked hair. Crippled by a strong sense of intimidation, I would whisper a one-line prayer for God to send his Spirit to that place. I didn't pray loud or long. I just prayed. I'm not even sure I believed it.

But then, surprisingly, different doors began to open through Emily's persistent volunteer efforts. I found myself in settings I never thought I'd enter, linked with people I never thought I'd meet. I remember our first experience of Friday night football games. Staring out over the horizon as the sun set behind the stands, I said short prayers to the Father for the lives of some of the students. Then I found myself part of the "chain gang," holding the first down markers, pacing the sidelines in front of hot-headed coaches from different schools and looking into the eyes of countless young football players. Their bold faces masked their insecurities and longings to be loved by fathers rather than abused by coaches.

Then, to my amazement, I found myself in that very role, coaching softball for six years. I didn't have a clue what I was doing, but I was determined to treat these girls with the dignity of daughters. Before each season, Mickey Cook and I would walk the softball field, praying for the girls that God would send us. I was always surprised. It never turned out as we planned. Yet in the midst of memories and fun, our last season seemed to be the worst. After six years of effort and care, team turnout was meager, motivation at an all-time low, parent involvement minimal, and the girls did not play well. With that I hung up my cleats and walked off my field of dreams. Dreams seemed washed and expectations lost. A few seeds planted, that was all. I took my role on the sidelines again.

Then in spring of this year I got a phone call telling me that the younger brother of one our former players had been killed in a car accident. I immediately called his par-

ents, and they asked me to officiate at his funeral. The service was held here in church to a packed house of grieving students, teachers and friends. As I looked out over the sea of faces glistening in their tears, I felt as if I was looking over ten years of intimate relationships. The church became a well of tears exploding with expressions of love for Matt and his family. At the end I shared a brief word as a dad who had lost a son, and why I believe in heaven.

After a couple of weeks had gone by, one of Katie's teachers asked me to come to his classroom and share what I had shared at the funeral. I would be part of a larger collection of guests sharing their philosophy of life, and he wanted me to take the entire hour in all six of his classes. I was a bit taken back. Katie said to me, "Now dad, don't teach and be boring. Just share your story. You have a good story." So on a Thursday that I will never forget I went to Homestead High School as a guest teacher and shared my life story to 180 students in six different classes. My host teacher said he was surprised to hear no backpack zippers that day. Usually the students can't wait to leave, and five minutes before class ends you can hear all the backpacks being zipped up. But that day the students were mesmerized.

I left the campus feeling that same acute sense of awe that gripped the women when they fled the tomb. What a privilege to have been a vital link for the risen Christ to this next generation of leaders! I thought of all those times I had driven by the campus as a stranger praying a doubting prayer. Arriving home, I was overcome with emotion, yet I was still unprepared for the note I found on the refrigerator door:

"Wow, Daddy,
You're so awesome. Everyone loved you so much!
One guy said it was the best day he had in Vos's class all year.
I love you. Katie."

A lifetime of ache for a father's words is swallowed in a moment of a daughter's love. Such is the resurrection.

Since then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Amen.

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1. Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 786.

2. Wessel, 786.

3. This is the view of Wessel, 793: "Thus the best solution seems to be that Mark did write an ending to his Gospel but that it was lost in the early transmission of the text. The ending we now possess represents attempts by the church to supply what was obviously lacking."

4. Wessel, 792.