

The Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark is a handbook for becoming a disciple of Jesus.

After briefly introducing us to the ministry of Jesus, his baptism and temptation in the desert, Mark tells us that Jesus' first decisive move in his ministry is to gather followers:

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.” (Mark 1.17-18)

The rest of the story traces the magnificent ministry of Jesus: three short years of preaching, teaching, and healing, all with these followers close at hand. These men were eyewitnesses to the miracles, received special “insiders-only” explanations of the parables, and were privy to the prayer life of the Son of God. You couldn't get closer to Jesus than these men did – they cried, laughed, argued, and ate together.

And in this book, Mark invites us into this inner circle of Jesus. We are invited to be disciples.

He wants us to come close, to see and hear Jesus in action, to be a part of the whirlwind that those 3 years were. When Jesus says to those fishermen, “Follow me,” we should hear him saying the same thing to us. Jesus himself is inviting us to be followers, to learn from him, to be united to him. And, for the first 8 chapters, there is nowhere else we'd rather be.

In the first 8 chapters, Mark depicts Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, God's King come to put the world to rights. Jesus has come to flip the world right-side up again, to restore what has been lost through sin and evil, to heal the sick and cleanse the diseased and bind-up the broken. He has come to destroy the work of the evil one in the world, and demonstrates his ultimate authority over evil as he silences and drives out one demonic spirit after another. “We know who you are” these evil spirits say, “the Holy One of God!” (Mark 1.24). Jesus silences the demons, casting them back to the pit of hell, and releasing those who have been held in bondage.

The authority of Jesus in these first 8 chapters extends into every realm. His teaching comes with such power and authority that the people exclaim in astonishment, “What is this? A new teaching with authority!” (Mark 1.22, 27) Rather than follow the custom of referencing other rabbis and teachers, Jesus just speaks, authoritatively proclaiming the way of God. His miracles range from walking on water and calming the storms to healing the paralyzed and feeding thousands from almost nothing. Make no doubt about it, Mark says: Jesus is the Son of God, the rightful King of the Earth, and he has come to take his throne!

And you and I, 2000 years later, are invited to be his followers, to be one of the insiders, to be on the team with Jesus as he sets the world right-side up! Remember: the Gospel of Mark is a handbook on becoming a disciple of Jesus, teaching us the ins and

outs of life with Jesus as Master and Teacher. And by the time we get to chapter 8, we are ready to be just that. We want to be with Jesus as he sets the world to rights, to celebrate the great victories over darkness, to be at his side as he teaches and preaches and heals! We are disciples of Jesus, a part of the inner circle, and his partners in ministry.

And in chapter 8, it all comes to a climax. Mark lets us in on the conversation as the disciples walked with Jesus:

“And on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’” (8.27)

As one of the insiders, you’ve now seen and heard the response of the people, and you could easily answer the question just as those first disciples did:

“And they told him, ‘John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.’” (8.28)

Yes, that’s right. The people say Jesus is something special, perhaps John the Baptist raised from the dead, or better yet, Elijah, the great Old Testament prophet. If nothing else, they are certain Jesus is some sort of prophet, sent to proclaim the Word of God. They have seen and heard him, and they have an idea or two about who Jesus is.

But then Jesus makes the question more personal:

“And he asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’” (8.29)

How would you answer that question?

For those of us who have been let into this inner circle, have spent the last 8 chapters side-by-side with Jesus, there is no doubt about how to answer that question. We know Jesus is not John the Baptist – we saw John baptize Jesus (Mark 1.9), and we know that Jesus was around long before John was beheaded by Herod (Mark 6.14-29). We also know he is something greater than Elijah – in fact, it was John the Baptist who came in the Spirit of Elijah, and John himself said, “After me comes one who is mightier than I” (Mark 1.7). And, while we certainly believe that Jesus is a prophet, even that generic title doesn’t do justice to what we have seen and heard and experienced in the first 8 chapters of this book. No – Jesus is something greater still, something more than the people have even imagined, something that only those of us on the inside have come to recognize. By the time we get to chapter 8, we are ready to confess with Peter:

“You are the Christ.” (Mark 8.29)

Yes! That is what he is, the one and only Anointed One; not just a prophet, but also a priest and a king. No, more than that: Jesus is *the* Prophet, Priest, and King, the one true Son of God, the King of the Earth! There can be *no other explanation* for what we’ve experienced in the last 8 chapters: the Spirit descending on him like a dove, the

Do You See Anything, Mark 8.22-31

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

- *Have you ever been totally misunderstood? How did it feel, and how did you rectify it?
- *What is your initial response to the story of Jesus' healing of the blind man?
- *How does the story connect with Jesus' questions in vs.17, 18, 21, 27, and 29?
- *How do we "see" Jesus? What is needed in order to understand him and be his disciple?
- *What is harsh about Jesus' words to his disciples? How would you respond if you were them?
- *How do you respond to Jesus' words today? What does it mean to "carry your cross?"
- *Are you a disciple of Jesus? How do you know, and where does that impact your life?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

voice from heaven saying "This is my beloved Son," the teaching with power, the casting out of demons with authority, the cleansing and healing and making things right – what else could this possibly mean? Jesus is the long-awaited Savior of the World! He will put an end to injustice, he will destroy the enemies of God, and he will usher in the Kingdom of God!

And for those of us on the inside, invited to be near him, this is *great* news! Its not just that Jesus is setting the world to rights, as if that wasn't great enough, but he has invited us to be his inner circle. We've been given a place of prominence in his plans, right-hand men to the King, his royal council! Doesn't that sound great?! Jesus is a rising star in the world, and he is taking us up with him! We will reign over the world with King Jesus!

Isn't that what being a disciple of Jesus is all about?

And then, what happens next is so unexpected, so inconsistent with what has been happening, so utterly backwards that we have no framework through which to even filter it:

"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. And he said this plainly." (Mark 8.31-32)

Can you hear the grinding of the gears as the disciples try to process these statements? If you have followed the story carefully, you'll realize this is the first time Jesus clearly spoke about his death and resurrection. For those of us who know the rest of the story, it might be easy to fault the disciples, to be frustrated with Peter's response to Jesus, and to shake our heads at him:

"And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him." (Mark 8.32)

But if you put yourself in the story, as Mark has invited us to do, you realize that the story has suddenly taken a very, very strange turn. The rising star begins to predict his downfall. Jesus' great career – and our great career with him – is just beginning to take off, on the cusp of a world takeover, a total re-ordering of the social and political world, and we were fully intent on being a part of it.

So Peter's response is not surprising at all. The Messiah shouldn't talk of dying at the hands of the religious leaders. The true Messiah is King, he is in charge, and he calls the shots and commands the kingdom. The King is the King, not some criminal to be rejected and silenced and murdered by the hypocritical religious leaders. *Jesus must be mistaken. Jesus needs to be challenged on this faulty view of the Messiah. Jesus needs to be rebuked, he needs to be reminded that the King reigns, and that all this talk of rejection and death is not fitting for a King.*

Can you understand Peter's astonishment and eagerness to correct Jesus? If Jesus is going down, then so are his disciples, and that is not what we signed up for. At least, it is not what we saw in the first 8 chapters.

So let me say this again, in light of the strange turn of events: The Gospel of Mark is a handbook for becoming a disciple of Jesus. Suddenly, being a disciple of Jesus means something entirely different than we initially thought. Listen to the way Jesus responds to Peter:

“But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’

“And he called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life?’

“For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8.33-38)

Apparently it is Peter who is need of a rebuke, and not a gentle one either. Apparently Peter, the disciples, and we ourselves have gotten Jesus wrong. We've missed it. We wanted in on the glory and the power and miracles, but we want nothing to do with this talk of a suffering and dying Messiah. And yet Jesus couldn't be any clearer: “If you want to be my disciple,” he says, “you'll need to die with me.”

Three times in the remaining chapters Jesus clearly predicts his coming death, and three times his disciples are shown to be in direct opposition to what he is saying. Jesus teaches that the Messiah must suffer; Peter tries to rebuke him (Mark 8.31-38). Jesus predicts that he will be delivered into the hands of men and killed; his disciples are having a conversation about which of them is the greatest (Mark 9.30-37). Jesus foretells that he will be condemned, mocked, spit upon, beaten, and crucified; the disciples are arguing about who will get the seats of honor when Jesus takes his throne (Mark 10.32-44). They couldn't be more opposed to each other.

But that is the point of Mark's Gospel.

Mark's Gospel invites us into the way of Jesus, first by establishing that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah and the King of the World, and then by flipping our understanding of the King and the Kingdom on its head. In this Kingdom, the King is a Suffering Servant, giving up his life for the sake of the world.

And the most fascinating statement in Mark's Gospel comes in the middle of his journey to the cross:

Do You Still Not Understand, Mark 8.1-21

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*What would it take for you to be completely convinced that Jesus is the Son of God? Why?

*Compare and contrast the 2 stories of multiplying food in Mark. Why do you think there are 2?

*What is the connection between the feeding of the 4000, the Pharisees, and Jesus' teaching in v.15?

*Look again at Mark 4.10-12. What is the connection with Jesus' questions in Mark 7.17-18?

*Why do you think the disciples don't yet understand? How can they so misunderstand Jesus?

*Do you think that you understand Jesus better than they? Why or why not?

*How can we understand Jesus better and more clearly?

*What is the role of faith in understanding and following Jesus?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

thing, but they aren't sure what they are seeing. And few, very few, like the Syrophenian woman, actually see Jesus.

It is no surprise that immediately following this healing comes the discussion between Jesus and his disciples concerning Jesus' true identity. "Who do people say that I am?" he asks his disciples. And here is where the story of the blind man really comes clear – the people don't know who Jesus is, though they have spent considerable time with him. "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; and others, one of the Prophets." There is no consensus because the people are blind.

Are the disciples blind? Jesus wants to know who they say that he is. Peter steps forward to boldly proclaim what all the disciples know at this point: "You are the Christ." Peter and the disciples know that Jesus is the anointed King of God, the Savior of the World, the one come from God to make all things right – or do they? Immediately following Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus begins to teach, for the first time, that he must suffer and die and be raised to life 3 days later. But that is not the kind of Christ that the disciples were hoping for! Peter got the words right, but totally missed the meaning. He can see, but not completely: "I see men, but they look like trees, walking." He cannot "see everything clearly" yet, and his rebuke to Jesus in v.32 reveals his deep lack of understanding.

This is the point at which the gospel of Mark takes a surprising turn. Those closest to Jesus cannot fathom what he means by this reversal in direction. They cannot comprehend that Jesus has come not as a conquering King but as a suffering Savior. They cannot understand that the cross is the only way.

And as we study the rest of this remarkable story, you'll see the chasm widen between their mistaken understanding of Jesus and the reality of who Jesus actually is.

Jesus begins in these words to reveal who he truly is and what will actually happen to him, and he invites the disciples to join him. "Take up your cross and follow me" would be like saying, "hey, I am on my way to the electric chair as a criminal, and if you want to be my disciple, you cannot avoid going there with me." How would you respond to that? Are you "ashamed" of Jesus and eager to rebuke such unnecessary talk? Or are you eager to die, too?

The invitation to discipleship is just beginning.

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10.45).

Jesus came as a suffering servant, not a conquering king. As he walked amongst the people, as he healed, taught, and cleansed, Jesus absorbed the evil of the world. He took upon himself the brokenness, the injustice, the hatred – all of it – from the beginning of time to the end, all of it was collected and focused upon him.

He came to serve. He gave his life as a ransom for many.

Historian and theologian N.T. Wright describes something of what this is like by referencing an old fable about a fox with fleas:

"Do you know how a fox gets rid of its fleas? The fox goes along the hedgerow, and collects little bits of sheep's wool. Then he makes it all into a ball of wool, which he holds in his mouth. Then he goes to the stream, and slowly, slowly, walks down into the water. He lowers himself right down into the water, with the ball of wool in his mouth, until at last he is totally submerged; then he lets go, and ball of wool floats away downstream, carrying all the fleas with it. The fox emerges, clean. In this image, Jesus is the ball of wool... He takes the weight of the world's evil upon himself, so that the world may emerge, clean." (N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus*, p.48)

It was all concentrated on Jesus, the full weight of it, and on the cross he suffered for the sin of the world. He took the punishment due to us for the ways in which we practice injustice, hatred, and evil. For the traces of sin permeating even our best of deeds, for the darkness and deception of our hearts, for our own self-love and indifference towards our neighbor, Jesus went down. And when he went down, he went all the way down. The full punishment for the evil of our world came crashing down on him. And the Son of God, the "beloved Son," was rejected by his own Father:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15.34)

This time, there is no voice from heaven, only the angry cries and jeering of the crowd and the silence of his disciples. As Jesus breathes his last, there is only one person who speaks: a Roman centurion, one of Jesus' executioners. In fact, in all the book of Mark, he is the only one who makes this confession about Jesus:

'Truly this man was the Son of God!'" (Mark 15.39)

Mark is driving home his point again: *You don't begin understand Jesus until you see him hanging lifeless on the cross.* Until you realize that the Son of God is the Suffering Servant, offering his life as a ransom for many; until you see him nailed to the cross, rejected by his father, deserted by his disciples, and surrounded by murders; until you hear the temple curtain that separates God and man ripping in half; until you stand at the foot of the cross, near the Roman centurion, and realize that Jesus has taken the

full weight of the world's evil upon himself in order that the world may emerge clean; only then can you begin to be a disciple.

But Mark isn't done, because the story hasn't yet been fully told. In fact, if Jesus had stayed dead, there would be no story to tell, and there would be no invitation to discipleship. So Mark recounts the events that followed the death of Jesus, and does so in a characteristically short 8 verses.* Early on the 3rd day, the first day of the week, the women – the disciples are no where to be seen – come to the tomb to anoint and spice the body. Only there is no body. Instead of a body beginning to rot, they encounter an angel, proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth has risen from the dead, and commanding them to pass along the message to the disciples. And then Mark concludes with a fascinating sentence:

“And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16.8)

In the end, even the empty tomb fails to lead to true discipleship. The women don't go running out to spread the good news of a resurrected Messiah; rather, they run away in fear and silence. But by this point we aren't surprised, because this is the ongoing theme of Mark's gospel: *discipleship is not easily understood and even more difficult to embrace.*

Mark's conclusion isn't a conclusion at all. In fact, if you go all the way back to the first line of the book, you'll remember that Mark was writing “the *beginning* of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1.1) This is just the beginning, and so his lack of a true conclusion reveals that chapter 16, verse 8 is nothing more than the end of the *beginning* of the gospel. This gospel is just getting started; the resurrection of Jesus is the cutting of the red tape, the first shovel of the whole universe remodel, the confirmation that the whole world will emerge clean.

And while the women flee the tomb in fear, we are left to ponder the meaning of all 16 chapters of Mark's gospel. We aren't told the rest of the story, how Jesus eventually appeared to his disciples, how the Spirit descended upon them, how the gospel continued to go out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Mark leaves us at the empty tomb, watching the women flee and wondering where the disciples might be hiding. But most of all, Mark leaves us without Jesus. What happened to him? Where is he?

But that is the point of Mark's gospel. Mark isn't so concerned with how Jesus appeared to all the others and what happened as a result in their lives. Yes, that story is important, and it needs to be told, too. But Mark is writing to people like you and I who were not eyewitnesses, who did not know Jesus in his earthly ministry, and who are wondering what all this has to do with *us*.

And Mark is telling us that it has everything to do with us because *Jesus is alive*.

The resurrection of Jesus invites us to be disciples of the living Jesus, and as readers we are confronted with a decision: Will the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God con-

Commentary

The feeding of the four thousand at first looks like nothing more than a repetition of the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6.30ff) with just a few changes in details. There is a large crowd, a lack of food, and a miracle by Jesus to meet their need in both accounts. So is it the same story, or should be understood that Jesus multiplied bread and fish on two separate occasions?

The context of the story argues for a second miracle, particularly in light of Mark's attention to detail and masterful storytelling. By including important differences in detail (number of people, amount of food, location, etc.) Mark is signaling to us that this is a separate story with a different thrust. The most important difference is that Jesus is still in Gentile territory, so the story should be connected with the Syrophenician woman (7.24-30) and the deaf and mute man (7.31-37). The thrust of this second feeding miracle is that just as Jesus satisfies the hunger of Israel he equally satisfies the hunger of the Gentiles. He is the Savior for all humanity, identifying with their need (“I have compassion on the crowd”) and then meeting that need in himself.

The Pharisees show up again in v.11, and Jesus all but refuses to engage them. Jesus and his disciples leave the region and return to Bethsaida by boat; along the way Jesus takes the opportunity to teach his disciples about the hypocrisy of the religious and political leaders, warning his disciples to avoid such charades at all costs. Unfortunately, as has now become characteristic of his disciples, they totally misunderstand him, thinking that his reference to yeast is a indictment against their failure to remember to bring bread for their journey. No wonder Jesus is so exasperated with them!

His questions to them in vs.17-18 should remind us of the quote from Isaiah that Jesus used in Mark 4.12. The first half of Mark's Gospel is coming to a close, and Mark wants us to see that despite everything that the disciples have witnessed up to this point, they still do not understand Jesus. The two miracles of multiplying bread should have taught the disciples the important lesson that being “in the boat” with Jesus is enough: he alone supplies all need because he alone is the anointed King, God's only Son. But they don't see it, they don't get it, they don't understand. They are blind.

The story of the healing of the blind man is more than a simple miracle; in fact, is it the central miracle of the book of Mark, the key to unlocking Mark's gospel. The story itself seems a bit odd: Jesus spits in a dude's eyes and half-steps the healing so that the man thinks people are trees before he brings the healing to completion. Huh? What is going on?

Everyone in the book of Mark is exactly like the blind man. Some watch and listen to Jesus and they see nothing, they are totally blind. Others, like the disciples, see some-

Goodness and Severity, Mark 7.24-37

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

- *What are some of the most derogatory terms used in our culture? Why are they so hurtful?
- *What is your initial response to Jesus calling this woman a dog? Does it seem consistent with Jesus?
- *What do you make of the woman's response? How might it be an example of courageous faith?
- *Why do you think Mark includes the story of the woman if it might seem to reflect negatively on Jesus?
- *Read Isaiah 35.1-10. Tyre & Sidon are in the region of Lebanon (Isaiah 35.2). How does that affect the story of the woman and the deaf & mute man?
- *God's salvation spreads from Israel to the nations. How does Israel respond, and how do the nations?
- *What are the implications for how we view Jews? What are the implications for missions?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

tinue in you? Will you become a disciple of Jesus? Will you take what Jesus has done for you and live it out for the good of the world? Will you step into the upside down kingdom, follow the downward path of the King, and lose your life in order to find it?

These are difficult questions when we look at the Gospel of Mark as a whole. Most of us like the idea of following a conquering, healing, teaching, powerful Jesus. But the idea that being a disciple of Jesus requires carrying our crosses, serving others, and giving our lives for the good of the world is difficult to get excited about.

And the worst part is that, for most of us, our dying with Jesus will take the rest of our lives. It isn't a matter of throwing yourself in front of a speeding car in order to save a young child, though you should probably do that if you get a chance. It is about daily laying aside your wants, your desires, your ego, your time, your money, and your very self in order to serve others.

Here is the reality: the only way you will ever sign up for this is if you see *that Jesus did it for you*. Until you realize that his death was for you, not in a general sense, but specifically – he died on that cross for your sin – you will never consider becoming a disciple. Until you realize that the only way for God to destroy sin and evil in the world without destroying you in the process was to send his beloved Son to take the punishment himself, and that he freely and joyfully chose to do so, you will never choose to lay down your life for others.

But, if you take the Gospel of Mark, this wild story of God's Son, the true and rightful King of the Earth coming to die in your place, and doing it all out of powerful and eternal love for you, and you take it into you, deeply and truly allowing the Story to remake your innermost being, your desires, your whole life, then following Jesus as a disciple becomes the only real option. What else *can* you do?

The tomb is empty and Jesus is alive! He is inviting you to become his disciple, to allow the Story of his life, death, and resurrection to transform and remake you!

The Gospel of Mark is a handbook for becoming a disciple of Jesus. Are you interested?

[*The original manuscripts do not include verses 9-20. They were most likely added later from other reliable sources in an attempt to bring more conclusion to what seems like an awkward ending.]

Becoming Clean, Mark 7.14-23

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*What is the most important thing to you, really? (not the Sunday school answer, please!)

*What contrast is Jesus drawing in this passage? What limits are placed on what is outside of us?

*What is the point of Jesus' questioning in vs. 18-19? What is he getting at?

*Does this mean that we are free to watch pornography or get drunk? Why or why not?

*How do evils things come out of our hearts? What does this say about our hearts need?

*What must rule our hearts if we are to have good things coming out of them

*How does our heart get changed? What is the process?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

Jesus and the Bible, Mark 7.1-13

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*What are some of the religious things that Christians do that aren't in the Bible? Is that wrong?

*What, according to Jesus, is the problem with the traditions of man? Is that always the case?

*Do you think the Pharisees were trying to only honor God with their lips? How did they do that?

*What is attractive about having rules and regulations for every area of life? Why do we do that?

*What is wrong with the rules and regulations? Shouldn't we have convictions on issues?

*How do we steer clear of "making void the word of God?"

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

For Study Alone and In Community

Mark, the author of this Gospel, was not one of Jesus' original 12 disciples; he was, rather, a ministry partner of one of Jesus' best friends, the apostle Peter. Mark wrote his Gospel from the firsthand accounts of Peter and the other disciples.

As the good news about Jesus spread out from Jerusalem, the ratio of eyewitness to new believers was quickly decreasing – there simply were not enough of the original disciples, or even of the 500 that Jesus appeared to after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15.3-8), to give leadership to all these new churches. Apostles like Peter and John, and missionaries like Paul (not one of the original twelve, though he did encounter Jesus after his resurrection), traveled around Mediterranean preaching the gospel and starting churches, recounting for these new converts the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and urging people to repent and believe the good news.

But the apostles and missionaries could not stay with these new churches for long. So men like Paul and Peter wrote letters to the churches they started, reminding them of the central tenets of the gospel and instructing the churches in what to believe and how to live. These letters were copied and sent along to other churches, and quickly gained authority in the churches. When the church gathered, these letters would be read and explained alongside certain Old Testament passages that foretold the coming of Jesus.

As a part of this effort to keep these churches grounded in the truth about Jesus, Mark sat down with the apostle Peter and recorded Peter's experience of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Mark then took Peter's stories, combined them with other records of the life and teachings of Jesus, and wrote it out in narrative form. The point of all this was that, once written, the church wouldn't need to have an apostle or missionary come and teach about Jesus. They could take the Gospel of Mark and read it aloud, and they would have the story of the real Jesus recorded.

When you read the Gospel of Mark, you must realize that Mark writes intentionally. He is not simply giving us an account of Jesus; rather, he is writing in order to preserve that which the eyewitnesses heard and experienced in Jesus. It was imperative that the churches not start making up their own stories about Jesus, or simply take rumors about Jesus as fact. These new Christians needed the true gospel about the living Jesus, and they needed it soon, before the eyewitnesses passed away (or, as was most common for these eyewitnesses, they were martyred for their testimony).

So Mark and Peter collaborate to write the story of Jesus in narrative form, knowing that these house churches will be reading it aloud whenever they gather. In the intersection of Peter's experience of Jesus, Mark's diligent and intentional organization, and the Holy Spirit's role of breathing life into what was written (2 Tim 3.16, 2 Peter 1.21), we have this inspired Gospel. It is the Gospel that will be passed on to future generations, read and re-read, copied and distributed, and will be the centerpiece of the Church whenever and wherever it gathers - just as it is today.

Mark is writing to Christians in Rome, most likely during the persecution of Nero, around the year AD 65, when thousands of Christians quite literally gave up their lives for the sake of Jesus. So Mark offers them a handbook for being a disciple in a place where dying for Jesus' sake was a real possibility. And while we may not be threatened with death for following Jesus, we certainly live in a world where the upside-down nature of the Kingdom of God finds little welcome.

As we read and study Mark's Gospel together, this study guide will serve to encourage reflection and discussion. In order to help you really enter into the story and understand it, I have written a brief commentary for each chapter of the Gospel. Following the commentary, I have broken down each chapter into a number of sections that correspond to the way that we'll cover the text together on Sunday nights. This will give you the opportunity to understand the big picture from chapter to chapter while still encouraging you to study deeply each section.

In addition, each smaller section has room to record questions, concerns, or doubts. Every 6 weeks or so we'll take one Sunday night and just deal with some hard and unanswered questions. Being a disciple of Jesus requires the courage to ask hard questions, to investigate, and to live with the ambiguities. So as you are studying, or as you are taking notes on the sermon, jot down questions that you have. We'll collect these questions and spend a night every 6 weeks or so trying to answer them.

It will take us about a year to complete our study in the gospel of Mark. This current study guide will take you through the first 8 chapters; a second study guide will be available for the following 8 chapters when we get there, sometime in late Fall or early Winter 2007.

of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy" (Isaiah 35.5-6). The prophet is not speaking about Israel, but rather about the impact of the coming of God's Messiah on all the nations of earth. And the word used in Mark 7.32 for "speech impediment" is the exact same word used in Isaiah for "mute;" in fact, these are the only two places in all of Scripture that this word occurs! Mark is a masterful storyteller, and he is making his point subtly but boldly: Jesus is God's Messiah, and his work of salvation extends beyond Israel to all the nations of the earth.

Mark initially wrote his gospel for the church in Rome, so you can imagine how important this chapter would be for Roman (non-Jewish) Christians. The whole chapter teaches that the customs and manners of Jews are not required for Gentile Christians and that God's work of salvation in Jesus encompasses the entire world. Salvation is open to everyone through Israel's Messiah!

The Whole Bible In A Year

evil, than no number of outer rules and regulations will ever get us to be obedient. We will always find the loopholes! If, on the other hand, our hearts are made good, if we are clean on the inside, then what comes out of us will be good, and we won't need infinite rules and regulations.

We must recognize that our hearts are bad. The heart is the drive-shaft of your life: whatever you love, whatever you most desire, whatever you put first in your heart, that thing will determine what you do. If you take the good news that you are absolutely loved and accepted just as you are because Jesus died for your sin, and you place that as the fulfillment of your heart's desires, what will come out of your heart? You won't need a million outward regulations because the good commandments of the Law will begin to naturally flow out from within you!

This conflict with the Pharisees results in Jesus leaving the area and heading to the Gentile regions of Tyre and Sidon. One of the repeated themes of the New Testament is that salvation has come in Jesus, first for the Jews, and then for the Gentiles. God chose the Jews out of all the people of the earth to bring his Messiah through, and so Jesus comes first to them. But they don't recognize him, they reject him, and ultimately they kill him. We see this theme in chapter seven. After being rejected by the religious leaders, Jesus heads to Gentile territory where we see one of the clearest expressions of genuine faith in the whole gospel of Mark, and it comes from a Gentile woman!

The woman's daughter is possessed, and hearing that Jesus has come to the region, she comes running in and falls at Jesus feet. It is a fascinating conversation. The Jews regarded the Gentiles as "dogs," a term which was anything but endearing. According to the Jewish understanding, God chose the Jews over and against the rest of the world (in actuality, God chose the Jews for the sake of bringing salvation to the rest of the world, a point that the prophets of the Old Testament clearly understood when they declared that God's Messiah would be "a light to the Gentiles"). So "dog" was meant as a derogatory term indicating that Gentiles were dirty mongrels. Does Jesus, too, call this woman a dog?

Actually, Jesus uses a different term for "dog" than the Jews normally ascribed to Gentiles. His word was a variant which meant something more like "house puppy," and in doing so he actually invites the woman into dialogue. Jesus is using a parable, and this Gentile woman is the only person in all of Mark who understands one of Jesus' parables without the need for explanation! She recognizes Jesus' subtle inference that, although the Gentiles may not be "children," they are still "in the house," and that the blessing that comes to the children will naturally spill off the table onto the floor! Her response is one of great faith, deep courage, a wise wit. And Jesus is impressed! She understands that Jesus is the Messiah and that, though his mission may be "first for the Jews," his purpose is nothing less than a total restoration of all of humanity. She wants in on it now, and Jesus grants what she desires!

The story of the deaf and speech impaired man serves to emphasize the point. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah said, "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears

In addition to studying deeply each week in the Gospel of Mark, I'd encourage you to read larger portions of Scripture. Included in this introduction is a plan for reading the Bible in a year chronologically. Reading chronologically, rather than front to back, allows you to get a better feel for how the Scripture holds together as a single Story, beginning with Creation, culminating in Jesus, and concluding with a New Heavens and New Earth. Reading the Bible in a year requires about 3 chapters each day. If you are studying deeply in Mark, reading the Bible in a year, and spending time in reflective prayer, your daily time on this will be about 35-45 minutes.

Day 1 --- Genesis 1-3
Day 2 --- Genesis 4-7
Day 3 --- Genesis 8-11
Day 4 --- Job 1-5
Day 5 --- Job 6-9
Day 6 --- Job 10-13
Day 7 --- Job 14-16
Day 8 --- Job 17-20
Day 9 --- Job 21-23
Day 10 --- Job 24-28
Day 11 --- Job 29-31
Day 12 --- Job 32-34
Day 13 --- Job 35-37
Day 14 --- Job 38-39
Day 15 --- Job 40-42
Day 16 --- Genesis 12-15
Day 17 --- Genesis 16-18
Day 18 --- Genesis 19-21
Day 19 --- Genesis 22-24
Day 20 --- Genesis 25-26
Day 21 --- Genesis 27-29
Day 22 --- Genesis 30-31
Day 23 --- Genesis 32-34
Day 24 --- Genesis 35-37
Day 25 --- Genesis 38-40
Day 26 --- Genesis 41-42
Day 27 --- Genesis 43-45
Day 28 --- Genesis 46-47
Day 29 --- Genesis 48-50
Day 30 --- Exodus 1-3
Day 31 --- Exodus 4-6
Day 32 --- Exodus 7-9
Day 33 --- Exodus 10-12
Day 34 --- Exodus 13-15
Day 35 --- Exodus 16-18
Day 36 --- Exodus 19-21
Day 37 --- Exodus 22-24
Day 38 --- Exodus 25-27
Day 39 --- Exodus 28-29
Day 40 --- Exodus 30-32
Day 41 --- Exodus 33-35
Day 42 --- Exodus 36-38
Day 43 --- Exodus 39-40
Day 44 --- Leviticus 1-4
Day 45 --- Leviticus 5-7

Day 46 --- Leviticus 8-10
Day 47 --- Leviticus 11-13
Day 48 --- Leviticus 14-15
Day 49 --- Leviticus 16-18
Day 50 --- Leviticus 19-21
Day 51 --- Leviticus 22-23
Day 52 --- Leviticus 24-25
Day 53 --- Leviticus 26-27
Day 54 --- Numbers 1-2
Day 55 --- Numbers 3-4
Day 56 --- Numbers 5-6
Day 57 --- Numbers 7
Day 58 --- Numbers 8-10
Day 59 --- Numbers 11-13
Day 60 --- Numbers 14-15 - Psalm 90
Day 61 --- Numbers 16-17
Day 62 --- Numbers 18-20
Day 63 --- Numbers 21-22
Day 64 --- Numbers 23-25
Day 65 --- Numbers 26-27
Day 66 --- Numbers 28-30
Day 67 --- Numbers 31-32
Day 68 --- Numbers 33-34
Day 69 --- Numbers 35-36
Day 70 --- Deuteronomy 1-2
Day 71 --- Deuteronomy 3-4
Day 72 --- Deuteronomy 5-7
Day 73 --- Deuteronomy 8-10
Day 74 --- Deuteronomy 11-13
Day 75 --- Deuteronomy 14-16
Day 76 --- Deuteronomy 17-20
Day 77 --- Deuteronomy 21-23
Day 78 --- Deuteronomy 24-27
Day 79 --- Deuteronomy 28-29
Day 80 --- Deuteronomy 30-31
Day 81 --- Deuteronomy 32-34 - Psalm 91
Day 82 --- Joshua 1-4
Day 83 --- Joshua 5-8
Day 84 --- Joshua 9-11
Day 85 --- Joshua 12-15
Day 86 --- Joshua 16-18
Day 87 --- Joshua 19-21
Day 88 --- Joshua 22-24
Day 89 --- Judges 1-2
Day 90 --- Judges 3-5
Day 91 --- Judges 6-7

chapter seven

Day 92 --- Judges 8-9
Day 93 --- Judges 10-12
Day 94 --- Judges 13-15
Day 95 --- Judges 16-18
Day 96 --- Judges 19-21
Day 97 --- Ruth 1-4
Day 98 --- 1 Samuel 1-3
Day 99 --- 1 Samuel 4-8
Day 100 --- 1 Samuel 9-12
Day 101 --- 1 Samuel 13-14
Day 102 --- 1 Samuel 15-17
Day 103 --- Psalm 11 - 1 Samuel 18-20 - Psalm 59
Day 104 --- 1 Samuel 21-24
Day 105 --- Psalm 7 - Psalm 27 - Psalm 31 - Psalm 34 - Psalm 52
Day 106 --- Psalm 56 - Psalm 120 - Psalm 140-142
Day 107 --- 1 Samuel 25-27
Day 108 --- Psalm 17 - Psalm 35 - Psalm 54 - Psalm 63
Day 109 --- Psalm 18 - 1 Samuel 28-31
Day 110 --- Psalm 121 - Psalm 123-125 - Psalm 128-130
Day 111 --- 2 Samuel 1-4
Day 112 --- Psalm 6 - Psalm 8-10 - Psalm 14 - Psalm 16 - Psalm 19 - Psalm 21
Day 113 --- 1 Chronicles 1-2
Day 114 --- Psalm 43-45 - Psalm 49 - Psalm 84-85 - Psalm 87
Day 115 --- 1 Chronicles 3-5
Day 116 --- Psalm 73 - Psalm 77-78
Day 117 --- 1 Chronicles 6
Day 118 --- Psalm 81 - Psalm 88 - Psalm 92-93
Day 119 --- 1 Chronicles 7-10
Day 120 --- Psalm 102-104
Day 121 --- 2 Samuel 5:1-10 - 1 Chronicles 11-12
Day 122 --- Psalm 133
Day 123 --- Psalm 106-107
Day 124 --- 2 Samuel 5:11-6:23 - 1 Chronicles 13-16
Day 125 --- Psalm 1-2 - Psalm 15 - Psalm 22-24 - Psalm 47 - Psalm 68
Day 126 --- Psalm 89 - Psalm 96 - Psalm 100 - Psalm 101 - Psalm 105 - Psalm 132
Day 127 --- 2 Samuel 7 - 1 Chronicles 17
Day 128 --- Psalm 25 - Psalm 29 - Psalm 33 - Psalm 36 - Psalm 39
Day 129 --- 2 Samuel 8-9 - 1 Chronicles 18
Day 130 --- Psalm 50 - Psalm 53 - Psalm 60 - Psalm 75
Day 131 --- 2 Samuel 10 - 1 Chronicles 19 - Psalm 20
Day 132 --- Psalm 65-67 - Psalm 69-70
Day 133 --- 2 Samuel 11-12 - 1 Chronicles 20
Day 134 --- Psalm 32 - Psalm 51 - Psalm 86 - Psalm 122
Day 135 --- 2 Samuel 13-15
Day 136 --- Psalm 3-4 - Psalm 12-13 - Psalm 28 - Psalm 55
Day 137 --- 2 Samuel 16-18
Day 138 --- Psalm 26 - Psalm 40 - Psalm 58 - Psalm 61-62 - Psalm 64
Day 139 --- 2 Samuel 19-21
Day 140 --- Psalm 5 - Psalm 38 - Psalm 41-42
Day 141 --- 2 Samuel 22-23 - Psalm 57

Day 142 --- Psalm 95 - Psalm 97-99
Day 143 --- 1 Chronicles 21-22 - 2 Samuel 24 - Psalm 30
Day 144 --- Psalm 108-110
Day 145 --- 1 Chronicles 23-25
Day 146 --- Psalm 131 - Psalm 138-139 - Psalm 143-145
Day 147 --- 1 Chronicles 26-29 - Psalm 127
Day 148 --- Psalm 111-118
Day 149 --- 1 Kings 1-2 - Psalm 37 - Psalm 71 - Psalm 94
Day 150 --- Psalm 119:1-88
Day 151 --- 2 Chronicles 1 - 1 Kings 3-4 - Psalm 72
Day 152 --- Psalm 119:89-176
Day 153 --- Song of Solomon 1-8
Day 154 --- Proverbs 1-3
Day 155 --- Proverbs 4-6
Day 156 --- Proverbs 7-9
Day 157 --- Proverbs 10-12
Day 158 --- Proverbs 13-15
Day 159 --- Proverbs 16-18
Day 160 --- Proverbs 19-21
Day 161 --- Proverbs 22-24
Day 162 --- 2 Chronicles 2-3 - 1 Kings 5-6
Day 163 --- 2 Chronicles 4 - 1 Kings 7
Day 164 --- 2 Chronicles 5 - 1 Kings 8
Day 165 --- 2 Chronicles 6-7 - Psalm 136
Day 166 --- Psalm 134 - Psalm 146-150
Day 167 --- 2 Chronicles 8 - 1 Kings 9
Day 168 --- Proverbs 25-26
Day 169 --- Proverbs 27-29
Day 170 --- Ecclesiastes 1-6
Day 171 --- Ecclesiastes 7-12
Day 172 --- 2 Chronicles 9 - 1 Kings 10-11
Day 173 --- Proverbs 30-31
Day 174 --- 1 Kings 12-14
Day 175 --- 2 Chronicles 10-12
Day 176 --- 2 Chronicles 13-16 - 1 Kings 15:1-24
Day 177 --- 1 Kings 15:25-16:34 - 2 Chronicles 17
Day 178 --- 1 Kings 17-19
Day 179 --- 1 Kings 20-21
Day 180 --- 2 Chronicles 18 - 1 Kings 22
Day 181 --- 2 Chronicles 19-23
Day 182 --- Obadiah 1 - Psalm 82-83
Day 183 --- 2 Kings 1-4
Day 184 --- 2 Kings 5-8
Day 185 --- 2 Kings 9-11
Day 186 --- 2 Kings 12-13 - 2 Chronicles 24
Day 187 --- 2 Kings 14 - 2 Chronicles 25
Day 188 --- Jonah 1-4
Day 189 --- 2 Kings 15 - 2 Chronicles 26
Day 190 --- Isaiah 1-4
Day 191 --- Isaiah 5-8
Day 192 --- Amos 1-5
Day 193 --- Amos 6-9
Day 194 --- Isaiah 9-12 - 2 Chronicles 27
Day 195 --- Micah 1-7
Day 196 --- 2 Kings 16-17 - 2 Chronicles 28
Day 197 --- Isaiah 13-17
Day 198 --- Isaiah 18-22
Day 199 --- Isaiah 23-27
Day 200 --- 2 Kings 18:1-8 - 2 Chronicles 29-31 - Psalm 48

Commentary

The first half of chapter seven records the longest direct conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of the day. The Pharisees were a devout group of men who whose zeal for the Old Testament Law set them apart from the common Jewish people. They considered themselves the guardians of true belief and right living in Judaism, and the people respected them as men of God and teachers. The extended conflict between these Pharisees and Jesus centers on issues of “traditions” and moral uncleanness.

Judaism was essentially governed first by the Old Testament Law that God revealed to Moses, including and especially the 10 commandments (called the Torah), and secondly by what was a sort of evolving oral law (called the Mishnah). The Mishnah was an ongoing attempt by the religious leaders and teachers to apply the Law to every instance of normal life; therefore, the Pharisees saw it as a way to “fence” the Torah, helping the common people to live the commandments of the Torah in all the possible situations of life. The Torah was “official policy,” but considered too ambiguous for everyday life; the Mishnah detailed how the intent of the Torah was to be fulfilled in actuality. The Pharisees were zealous about this oral tradition because they saw it as a protective measure that ensured that no one even came close to possibly breaking a law in the Torah.

The precise confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees regards the multiplying of the Law in this oral tradition, turning the Torah into a heavy burden of man-made traditions, serving ultimately to disconnect people from God rather than encourage them to worship him. The eating with “defiled hands” was an accusation that came from this oral tradition and could not be argued for on the basis of the Torah alone. Jesus has no patience for this kind of religiosity.

As an example of this “rejecting the commandments of God in order to establish tradition,” Jesus points to a common practice known as Corban. Corban was similar to deferred giving: a child could declare his financial assets Corban, meaning that at his death they would be turned over to the temple, but that, in the meantime, he retained control over them. In this way, he can deprive his parents (“Sorry, I can’t provide for you in your old age; I’ve vowed all my assets to God!”) and still be personally financially secure. The 5th Commandment, “Honor your father and mother,” is thereby made null and void by a technical worship “loophole!” According to Jesus, this is just one example: “And many such things you do.”

The Pharisees had an “outside-in” view of holiness and obedience to God: if they could get all the possible situations figured out, then they could write a rule for them, and then they’d be able to ensure holiness before God. Jesus has an “inside-out” view: “the things that come out of a person defile him.” In both conversations, Jesus wants us to see that it is a matter of the heart. We live from our hearts, and if our hearts are

Day 201 --- Hosea 1-7
Day 202 --- Hosea 8-14
Day 203 --- Isaiah 28-30
Day 204 --- Isaiah 31-34
Day 205 --- Isaiah 35-36
Day 206 --- Isaiah 37-39 - Psalm 76
Day 207 --- Isaiah 40-43
Day 208 --- Isaiah 44-48
Day 209 --- 2 Kings 18:9-19:37 - Psalm 46 - Psalm 80 - Psalm 135
Day 210 --- Isaiah 49-53
Day 211 --- Isaiah 54-58
Day 212 --- Isaiah 59-63
Day 213 --- Isaiah 64-66
Day 214 --- 2 Kings 20-21
Day 215 --- 2 Chronicles 32-33
Day 216 --- Nahum 1-3
Day 217 --- 2 Kings 22-23 - 2 Chronicles 34-35
Day 218 --- Zephaniah 1-3
Day 219 --- Jeremiah 1-3
Day 220 --- Jeremiah 4-6
Day 221 --- Jeremiah 7-9
Day 222 --- Jeremiah 10-13
Day 223 --- Jeremiah 14-17
Day 224 --- Jeremiah 18-22
Day 225 --- Jeremiah 23-25
Day 226 --- Jeremiah 26-29
Day 227 --- Jeremiah 30-31
Day 228 --- Jeremiah 32-34
Day 229 --- Jeremiah 35-37
Day 230 --- Jeremiah 38-40 - Psalm 74 - Psalm 79
Day 231 --- 2 Kings 24-25 - 2 Chronicles 36
Day 232 --- Habakkuk 1-3
Day 233 --- Jeremiah 41-45
Day 234 --- Jeremiah 46-48
Day 235 --- Jeremiah 49-50
Day 236 --- Jeremiah 51-52
Day 237 --- Lamentations 1:1-3:36
Day 238 --- Lamentations 3:37-5:22
Day 239 --- Ezekiel 1-4
Day 240 --- Ezekiel 5-8
Day 241 --- Ezekiel 9-12
Day 242 --- Ezekiel 13-15
Day 243 --- Ezekiel 16-17
Day 244 --- Ezekiel 18-19
Day 245 --- Ezekiel 20-21
Day 246 --- Ezekiel 22-23
Day 247 --- Ezekiel 24-27
Day 248 --- Ezekiel 28-31
Day 249 --- Ezekiel 32-34
Day 250 --- Ezekiel 35-37
Day 251 --- Ezekiel 38-39
Day 252 --- Ezekiel 40-41
Day 253 --- Ezekiel 42-43
Day 254 --- Ezekiel 44-45
Day 255 --- Ezekiel 46-48
Day 256 --- Joel 1-3
Day 257 --- Daniel 1-3
Day 258 --- Daniel 4-6
Day 259 --- Daniel 7-9
Day 260 --- Daniel 10-12
Day 261 --- Ezra 1-3
Day 262 --- Ezra 4-6 - Psalm 137

Day 263 --- Haggai 1-2
Day 264 --- Zechariah 1-7
Day 265 --- Zechariah 8-14
Day 266 --- Esther 1-5
Day 267 --- Esther 6-10
Day 268 --- Ezra 7-10
Day 269 --- Nehemiah 1-5
Day 270 --- Nehemiah 6-7
Day 271 --- Nehemiah 8-10
Day 272 --- Nehemiah 11-13 - Psalm 126
Day 273 --- Malachi 1-4
Day 274 --- Luke 1 - John 1:1-14
Day 275 --- Matthew 1 - Luke 2:1-38
Day 276 --- Matthew 2 - Luke 2:39-52
Day 277 --- Mark 1 - Luke 3 - Matthew 3
Day 278 --- John 1:15-51 - Matthew 4 - Luke 4-5
Day 279 --- John 2-4
Day 280 --- Mark 2
Day 281 --- John 5
Day 282 --- Mark 3 - Luke 6 - Matthew 12:1-21
Day 283 --- Matthew 5-7
Day 284 --- Luke 7 - Matthew 8:1-13
Day 285 --- Matthew 11
Day 286 --- Luke 11 - Matthew 12:22-50
Day 287 --- Luke 8 - Matthew 13
Day 288 --- Mark 4-5 - Matthew 8:14-34
Day 289 --- Matthew 9-10
Day 290 --- Mark 6 - Luke 9:1-17 - Matthew 14
Day 291 --- John 6
Day 292 --- Mark 7 - Matthew 15
Day 293 --- Mark 8 - Luke 9:18-27 - Matthew 16
Day 294 --- Mark 9 - Luke 9:28-62 - Matthew 17
Day 295 --- Matthew 18
Day 296 --- John 7-8
Day 297 --- John 9:1-10:21
Day 298 --- John 10:22-42 - Luke 10-11
Day 299 --- Luke 12-13
Day 300 --- Luke 14-15
Day 301 --- Luke 16:1-17:10
Day 302 --- John 11
Day 303 --- Luke 17:11-18:14
Day 304 --- Mark 10 - Matthew 19
Day 305 --- Matthew 20-21
Day 306 --- Luke 18:15-19:48
Day 307 --- Mark 11 - John 12
Day 308 --- Mark 12 - Matthew 22
Day 309 --- Luke 20-21 - Matthew 23
Day 310 --- Mark 13
Day 311 --- Matthew 24
Day 312 --- Matthew 25
Day 313 --- Mark 14 - Matthew 26
Day 314 --- John 13 - Luke 22
Day 315 --- John 14-17
Day 316 --- Mark 15 - Matthew 27
Day 317 --- John 18-19 - Luke 23
Day 318 --- Mark 16 - Matthew 28
Day 319 --- John 20-21 - Luke 24
Day 320 --- Acts 1-3
Day 321 --- Acts 4-6
Day 322 --- Acts 7-8
Day 323 --- Acts 9-10
Day 324 --- Acts 11-12
Day 325 --- Acts 13-14

Day 326 --- James 1-5
Day 327 --- Acts 15-16
Day 328 --- Galatians 1-3
Day 329 --- Galatians 4-6
Day 330 --- Acts 17:1-18:18
Day 331 --- 1 Thessalonians 1-5 - 2 Thessalonians 1-3
Day 332 --- Acts 18:19-19:41
Day 333 --- 1 Corinthians 1-4
Day 334 --- 1 Corinthians 5-8
Day 335 --- 1 Corinthians 9-11
Day 336 --- 1 Corinthians 12-14
Day 337 --- 1 Corinthians 15-16
Day 338 --- 2 Corinthians 1-4
Day 339 --- 2 Corinthians 5-9
Day 340 --- 2 Corinthians 10-13
Day 341 --- Romans 1-3 - Acts 20:1-3
Day 342 --- Romans 4-7
Day 343 --- Romans 8-10
Day 344 --- Romans 11-13
Day 345 --- Romans 14-16

Day 346 --- Acts 20:4-23:35
Day 347 --- Acts 24-26
Day 348 --- Acts 27-28
Day 349 --- Philemon 1 - Colossians 1-4
Day 350 --- Ephesians 1-6
Day 351 --- Philippians 1-4
Day 352 --- 1 Timothy 1-6
Day 353 --- Titus 1-3
Day 354 --- 1 Peter 1-5
Day 355 --- Hebrews 1-6
Day 356 --- Hebrews 7-10
Day 357 --- Hebrews 11-13
Day 358 --- 2 Timothy 1-4
Day 359 --- Jude 1 - 2 Peter 1-3
Day 360 --- 1 John 1-5
Day 361 --- 2 John 1 - 3 John 1
Day 362 --- Revelation 1-5
Day 363 --- Revelation 6-11
Day 364 --- Revelation 12-18
Day 365 --- Revelation 19-22

The Terrifying Love of Jesus, Mark 6.45-56

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*Why is this story so difficult for modern minds to comprehend? Is it more or less miraculous than the resurrection?

*Why does Jesus not go with his disciples in the boat? What is he doing instead?

*Why do you think Jesus intends “to pass them by?” Why does he stop and get in the boat?

*What is the connection that Mark makes to the loaves in v.52?

*Why are the people coming to Jesus? How does this show a misunderstanding of Jesus’ true nature?

*Why did you first come to Jesus? How has your understanding of him changed or grown?

*What in the gospel of Mark has been most astounding to you thus far? Why?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

The Good Shepherd, Mark 6.31-44

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*What are your deepest hungers in life, the things you most long for and work for?

*Jesus and his disciples are trying to get away to rest. How do the crowds thwart their efforts?

*Why do you think Jesus allows the crowd to keep him & the disciples from eating and resting?

*What is compassion? How does Jesus exemplify compassion in his ministry?

*How do the disciples show lack of compassion?

*Jesus satisfies the hunger of the people in a desolate place. Ponder what that implies about Jesus.

*Has Jesus satisfied you deeply? If not, what are the areas where you are still “desolate?”

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

chapter one

Commentary

Mark begins his gospel with a bang!

He spends no time telling of Jesus’ miraculous birth, the travels of his early childhood, or the events of his adolescence. He says nothing about how Jesus came from the line of David and nothing about the fact that John the Baptist was his cousin. All these details can be found in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, but not Mark. It’s not that these details aren’t important, it’s just that Mark wants us to feel the surprising power of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus explodes on the scene in Mark!

The first thing he does is give his book a title: “The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (Notice: no verb in that first verse, a sure sign that Mark is giving us a heading or title) But after that, Mark begins in a surprising place: the Old Testament book of Isaiah, one of God’s greatest prophets, predicting the coming of a forerunner of the Messiah, someone who will “prepare the way” for the King (actually, it is a conglomeration of verses from both Isaiah 40.3 and Malachi 3.1). This “forerunner” is John the Baptist, the freaky cousin of Jesus, born just months before Jesus in a similarly miraculous way (see Luke 1-2). He lives in the desert, eats bugs and honey, and begins making a real scene about dunking people in the Jordan River to forgive their sins and prepare them for the coming Messiah. The crazy part is that people start flocking to him.

Can you imagine this sort of thing happening down at the Spokane River? Hardly. But we aren’t first century Jews who have been waiting 400 years for the Messiah to come and establish the Kingdom again. John was acting in a very symbolic way, and the people knew exactly what he was claiming to be and to do. For over 400 years the Jews had been telling and re-telling the Story of God’s purposes in the world. Are there any stories in your family that are passed down from generation to generation? Our culture isn’t real big on that kind of thing. But the Jewish people were a story-telling people. In many ways, they *had* to be. They were the people God had chosen out of every other nation to be God’s special people, the nation through whom God would bless and heal the world. It was a somewhat arrogant claim to make, one that didn’t make other nations happy, but it was a claim they made because they believed God chose their father Abraham for this very purpose. The whole Old Testament tells the story of God working through the descendants of Abraham, known as the nation of Israel, in order to fix this broken world.

Unfortunately, the nation of Israel did not live up to its calling to “bless the nations.” In fact, just when it seemed like God would do what he promised through this nation, the people rebelled, the kings disobeyed God, the priests became corrupt, and the nation was eventually torn and destroyed by the powerful warring nations around them. And then it seemed as if God went silent. The last time this people had heard anything from God was over 400 years ago. So they *had* to keep telling this story, to keep reminding

themselves and teaching their children that God chose them and that God would keep his promise and send another King through whom he'd fulfill His promise. So when John shows up in the wilderness, claiming to prepare the way for the King, the people immediately recognize what John is claiming. They know the story and they fully believe that if John has come to "prepare the way" then the King should be close behind. And so Mark has begun this gospel in a most remarkable way!

Jesus himself comes out to John to be baptized, also a symbolic act, for certainly Jesus was not coming to have his sins forgiven. Rather, Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his ministry, both the first step in identifying with the sin of the people and in announcing who he is. The heavens open, the Spirit of God descends upon him, and the Father declares his true identity: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." It is as if the King steps into the land that is rightfully his and declares he is about to begin his reign.

But first – and again this is highly symbolic – the Spirit that just came from heaven to anoint him for the task drives him into the desert to be tempted by Satan. It's another unexpected event, and yet particularly powerful in light of the role of the desert in the Old Testament. After all, it was the desert where Israel was tempted and subsequently failed to be who God wanted it to be. But Jesus is different, a new and better Israel, and he will not fail in the desert. He overcomes temptation and defeats Satan, a powerful beginning to his ministry. Mark wants to make it abundantly clear up front: Jesus is the Messiah, the beloved Son of God, the victor over sin and the tempter, and he has come to establish the Kingdom of God.

So Jesus launches into his ministry, and the rest of chapter one describes the astonishing authority and power that accompanies all that he does. He calls to himself disciples, men who will follow him and learn from him and share the load of ministry with him (1.16-20). These men leave their profession – fishing – in order to become, in Jesus' cryptic words, "fishers of men." In a sense, Mark is introducing us to the actors in this drama. Jesus is the center of everything, but his disciples – usually confused, often totally bewildered – are never far behind. In a way, you and I as readers are invited to be in this inner ring of Jesus' closest friends.

This calling of the first disciples is significant to Mark's purpose of giving us a handbook for becoming disciples. Jesus comes to where these men live, into their world, and calls them to himself. Fishermen were savvy businessmen who not only had to know how to cast a net but also how to barter and trade and negotiate a good price for their catch. Throughout the gospel, we see Jesus out in front, moving authoritatively and decisively, and the disciples struggling to understand or to even keep up.

There are others who play important roles in Mark's gospel. There are the common people, and they are awed by him – they have never seen anything like Jesus! Jesus preaches to them. Jesus teaches them. Jesus heals them. Jesus casts demons out of them. And as a result, his fame begins to spread. Mark wants us to feel the surprise of the people: "What is this? A new teaching with authority!"

The Fear of King Herod, Mark 6.14-30

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*Imagine the story of King Herod as a soap opera. Who are the characters, and what's the plot?

*Why do you think Mark sticks the story of John in here? What is John's role as related to Jesus?

*Why does King Herod behead John? What are the factors that lead to it?

*How is the courage of John the Baptist related to the sending of the apostles and their return?

*We live in a day of weak and timid leadership. How does discipleship require courage?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

The Offense of Jesus, Mark 6.1-13

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*Is following Jesus hard or easy? Why?

*What are the accusations that the Nazarenes make about Jesus? Why do they do that?

*What is the result of these accusations for Jesus and his ministry? Why was his ministry hindered?

*What is unbelief, and how do these people demonstrate it?

*What is the connection between Jesus' rejection at home and his sending out the apostles?

*What are the apostles to do if they are rejected as Jesus was? What does this mean?

*What supplies do the apostles get from Jesus? What are the implications for us as disciples?

*To whom has Jesus sent you, and how has he equipped you for that ministry?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

There are also the demons, and they play a fairly important role in Mark. Again and again you will hear the demons speak the truth about who Jesus is, the Son of God, a confession that the people, and even the disciples, don't make. Jesus silences them and drives them out with simple clear words spoken with awe-inspiring power. It's important to note that when Jesus silences the demons, it's not that he is ashamed of who he is or trying intentionally to conceal his identity; rather, Jesus is simply not interested in the miracles and exorcisms being the "draw." He doesn't want a crowd who come to him for the fireworks of his ministry, and his statements about the difficulty of discipleship underscore this fact. When Jesus silences the demons he drives home the point of this gospel: believing the right things about Jesus is not the same as believing in him and following him as his disciple.

And there is one other group of people that are still in the background, though they will come to play significant roles: the religious leaders. But they don't come into full view until chapter two, so we'll talk more about them then. It is sufficient at this point that we recognize that they are at the synagogue as Jesus teaches, they are present as he casts out the demons, and they quickly hear about the leper's cleansing (Jesus touching the leper was a huge religious "no, no!"). And they aren't happy.

Chapter one is powerful introduction to Jesus – the King has landed and he is on the move!

The Man in the Wilderness, Mark 1.1-8

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*What important stories have been told and passed on in your family? Why do families do that?

*Read Isaiah 40.1-5 and Malachi 3.1 & 4.5-6. Then read 1 Kings 1.8 and 18.30-45.

*How are these Old Testament passages (stories) important for understanding John the Baptizer?

*How does Jesus interpret John's actions (see Mark 9.11-13)? Why is this important?

*How can your life point to "one who is greater than I?" (see also John 3.30)

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

[God] alone stretches out the heavens
and treads on the waves of the sea.
When he passes me, I cannot see him;
When he goes by, I cannot perceive him.
(Job 9.8, 11)

The earliest readers of Mark would have been more scandalized by Jesus walking on the water than you and I, for only God could do such a thing. They had more barriers to believing this incredible claim than we ever will, especially Jesus' words, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." The phrase, "It is I" (literally "I Am") is exactly the same wording that God used to reveal himself to Moses and Israel in the Old Testament. In fact, "It is I" is God's name throughout the Old Testament, translated as Yahweh, or simply "the LORD" in our modern translations. All of these pointed to one thing; namely, that in Jesus we have the God of the universe, the Yahweh of the Old Testament, the great I Am who revealed himself to Moses! This story, as remarkable and difficult as it is to take at face value, carries a message even more remarkable and difficult: Jesus is God in the flesh.

Remember the question the disciples pondered following the calming of the storm, "Who then is this" (Mark 3.40)? This second story of terror on the sea drives home the point. Any hopes of casting Jesus as a great man, a wandering prophet, a wise sage, or a miracle worker are not only simplistic but also outright excluded by this story. Jesus is nothing less than God-With-Us, the holy and righteous God-Become-Man, maker of heaven and earth, and the supreme God over all of creation. But the disciples still don't see it, don't understand it, and don't believe it. "Their hearts were hardened," comments Mark. The primary barrier to belief is not the implausibility of Jesus' miracles but the rebellious refusal of the human heart to surrender to the God who made us and came in Jesus to save us.

is a disturbing story, and its position in the middle of a narrative about discipleship only makes it that much more disturbing. John's courage was costly. In being faithful to the One who sent him, John did not pander to political interests, did not read the polls before he spoke, did not hesitate to speak about injustice and sin. As disciples of Jesus we too are called to costly courage, the willingness to stand for what is unpopular, to identify with the poor and the needy, and to speak when tempted to remain silent.

The second half of chapter six contains two of the most fascinating stories in the gospel. The first, the miracle of feeding 5000 with a few loaves of bread and a couple fish, has often been reduced to a children's story about how God will multiply our efforts if only we'll share what we have. In reality, the story more closely resembles the beginnings of a radical revolution. The story is recounted in all 4 gospels, and John tells us that following the miracle the people "were about to come and take him by force to make him king" (John 6.15). Mark hints at the same thing when he says that Jesus "had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6.34). The imagery of the shepherd is taken from Old Testament references to Moses and to David. Moses was the Prophet and leader of God's people who delivered them from slavery in Egypt and led them into the Promised Land. David was the King of God's people in the Promised Land.

The story Mark tells does not describe a peaceful countryside picnic; rather, it is the making of a revolution, 5000 men assembled and ready to follow this anointed King into Jerusalem to restore the Kingdom of Israel. It is no surprise then that Jesus urges his disciples to leave quickly while he attempts to dismiss the crowd (v.45). Once again, as we've seen throughout the Gospel of Mark, the crowds don't understand Jesus and mistakenly form all sorts of opinions about him, most of which are entirely contradictory to his true nature and mission. The fascinating part is that he continues to have compassion on them, continues to heal them, and continues to teach them. Mark again summarizes his ministry amongst these crowds in vs. 53-56, reminding us both of the frenzy of attention that Jesus was attracting and his willingness to continue to minister to the misguided crowds.

The second of the fascinating stories is perhaps the most unbelievable of them all. After dismissing the crowds, Jesus heads up a nearby mountain to pray and be alone. His disciples, in the meantime, are having another rough night on the lake, rowing hard against the wind without making headway. So Jesus walks out to them on the lake. Are we supposed to believe that? Jesus is walking on the water? And furthermore, Mark tells us that Jesus wasn't actually going to them, but was planning on just passing them by. Is this a joke?

Many have sought rationalistic explanations for the story: perhaps it was an optical illusion, or maybe Jesus knew of a sandbar that went out to where the disciples happened to be. Others have tried to explain it as a post-resurrection story that Mark mistakenly placed into his story. The attempts to explain it away are less than convincing; indeed, in some ways they are more difficult to believe than the story itself! Mark gives us a couple clues to help us understand the story. Consider this Old Testament allusion from the book of Job:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mark 1.9-13

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

- *Describe an event that radically changed the course of your life. Why did it do so?
- *Jesus' baptism is recorded in all 4 gospels. Why is it so significant?
- *Do you think Jesus knew his identity before this event? Why or why not?
- *How do you think this event impacted his life and ministry?
- *These 3 events – his anointing by the Holy Spirit, the voice from heaven declaring Jesus to be the beloved Son, and the temptation by Satan in the desert – what do they have to do with us?
- *You are anointed with God's Spirit, and you are God's "beloved child." What does that do for you?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

Called to Be Disciples, Mark 1.14-20

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*If your house caught on fire, what one thing would you be sure to grab before you left?

*When Jesus comes proclaiming the gospel, what image does he use? Why does he do that?

*What are necessary elements of a kingdom?

*Define the words “repent” and “believe” – where else do these words show up in Scripture?

*Jesus’ first ministry move is to gather followers. Why do you think he does that?

*Why does Jesus call *these* men? What are their qualifications?

*Does being a disciple always require leaving important things behind? What, if anything, have you left?

*In calling these men, Jesus redefines their profession. Does he still do this to his followers today?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

chapter six

Commentary

Chapter six begins with Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth, a small village of maybe 500 people, where Jesus and his family would have been well known. His arrival in Nazareth prompts typical “small-town drama.” Not only is he not accepted amongst those who are most familiar with him, he is ridiculed and mocked by them in series of accusatory questions. The mention of his siblings is important, reminding us that his brothers and sisters did not believe him, perhaps primarily because they knew him (though James and Judas both became believers and leaders in the early church after his resurrection!).

Here he is called “the son of Mary,” an almost certain accusation that his father was not Joseph and that everyone assumed he was a bastard child. You can read more about the controversy of his virgin birth in the Gospel of Luke, chapters 1 & 2. Interestingly, Joseph and Mary had to travel away from Nazareth to Bethlehem for a census, and Mary had Jesus while they were there, sparing the extended family some of the shame of an unwed pregnancy. It was not enough to quell the rumors, though, as this passage reveals, and Jesus must have grown up in the shadow of these scandalous accusations. Needless to say, the town of Nazareth is not impressed with Jesus, a fact that seems to surprise even Jesus himself: “And he marveled because of their unbelief.”

In the context of this rejection, Jesus sends his 12 apostles to extend his ministry around the region. It has always been his plan to train this group of followers to engage in and continue his work (see Mark 3.13-19), though it certainly seems premature to send them out on their own! These 12 don’t understand Jesus, they have as much of a hard time believing him as the people of his hometown, and Jesus sends them out all but empty-handed! But this is discipleship: Jesus does not call the wise, the understanding, the powerful; he does not wait for his followers to be ready, to have all the right theology, to have consistent faith. Rather, Jesus sends them out with nothing but his authority, and it is all they need. The lesson should be clear to us: Jesus does not call the equipped; rather, he equips those he calls and he sends them out in his name, not to do their own works, but to continue and expand his work in the world.

Between the sending of the 12 and their return to Jesus in v.30, Mark recounts the story of how John the Baptizer was beheaded. The story is a twisted and perverted study in human nature. Herod has married his brother’s wife, Herodias, and because of John’s prophetic accusations against him, he’s imprisoned John. Herodias wants John dead because she’s tired of listening to him, though Herod has kept him alive because he is intrigued. The situation comes to a crux in a birthday party that Herod throws for himself, and in a lust-filled response to his wife’s daughters sensual dance, makes a promise to give to the girl whatever she wants. Herodias seizes the moment to request the death of John, and Herod is forced to fulfill the request in order to save face in front of his “nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee” (Mark 6.20). It

A New Authority, Mark 1.21-34

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*Who is the best teacher you've had? Why was this person such a good teacher?

*Why was Jesus allowed to teach in the synagogue on the Sabbath?

*What was different about his teaching? What accompanied his teaching that surprised the people?

*Where does the authority of Jesus come from? How do you know?

*Do you see Jesus as an authority? When you read his teaching, do you respond like the people?

*How can we as disciples help spread the fame of Jesus, specifically regarding his teachings?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

Prayer, Word, Deed, Mark 1.35-45

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

- *What do you think is most important for Christians: praying, preaching, or service? Why do you think that?
- *Why do you think Jesus rises early to pray? Is it significant that Peter interrupts him?!
- *Are you surprised by Jesus' response to Simon's report, "everyone is looking for you"?
- *Why does Jesus insist on going on to the next towns when he has had such success in Capernaum?
- *The word "pity" (or "compassion") means gut-wrenching agony. Why does he respond like that?
- *Jesus prays, preaches, and performs miracles. Explore what that means for us as his disciples.

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

The Timing of Jesus, Mark 5.21-43

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

- *Describe a time when you have been genuinely frustrated in your faith.
- * What are some similarities between Jairus and the woman? Differences?
- * How would it have felt to be Jairus when your daughter dies because Jesus is talking with this woman?
- *What does the woman exemplify that Jairus doesn't have? How do you know?
- *What do you make of the comment Jesus makes that the child "is not dead but sleeping?"
- *With whom do you more readily identify: Jairus or the woman? Why?
- *Do you think the timing of Jesus is wrong here? Should he have healed Jairus' daughter first? Why?
- *What do we do when Jesus does the unexpected in our lives? How should we respond?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

The Defeat of Evil, Mark 5.1-20

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*How do you respond to the stories of demons in Mark's gospel? Should we take them literally?

*Compared to previous stories, Mark includes a ton of details here. Why would he do that?

*Observe vs.1-5. What would you compare this man's existence to? Why? How did he become like this?

*Are there connections between this story of exorcism and the calming of the storm?

*What happens to the neighboring towns as a result of this exorcism? Is that favorable for Jesus' ministry?

*Why do you think Jesus forbids that man to come with him? What does he do instead?

*Look at what Jesus instructs the man to do. How are each of us given those same instructions?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

chapter two

Commentary

If chapter one started with a bang, chapter two raises everything to the next level. In chapter one, Jesus preaches, teaches, and heals with authority. He silences the demons and drives them out with power. He even cleanses a social and religious outsider, the leper. But none of this prepares us for the audacity of his claims in chapter two, and the increasing hostility coming from the religious authorities as a result. The chapter consists of five conflicts between Jesus and these religious leaders (we'll include Mark 3.1-6 in this section).

Suppose you borrow my car and crashed it. I'd have every right to be angry, especially if the repairs were costly. And if you came to me on your knees begging me to forgive you because there was no way you could pay to have my car fixed, I'd probably be angrier still! What if, right at that moment, someone came into the room and told you that you were forgiven and that you didn't need to pay the debt back. How would you respond? It wouldn't make any sense, would it? This person who has forgiven your debt is not the one you owe the debt to – they have no right or authority to forgive you! But what if that person was my lawyer? What if that person was my official representative, whom I had given the authority to execute my financial dealings?

In the first conflict of chapter two (2.1-12), Jesus is God's official representative, and he's come not just to teach and preach and heal but also to forgive. You can understand the shock of the religious leaders: how can Jesus claim to forgive sin when it is God who has been sinned against? This paralytic has not sinned against Jesus – or has he? The religious leaders understood what Jesus was claiming in the pronouncement of forgiveness, and so they accused him of blasphemy, of claiming to be God's official representative. Without them having said a word, Jesus perceives what is going on in their hearts, and so proves that he does indeed have the authority to forgive sins by healing the man. It is an important development in who we are to understand Jesus to be. He is not only authoritative in his teaching, preaching, and healing, he is authoritative in eradicating sin, the truest and deepest human problem. This King has come not just to heal people physically and teach them to live well, but to restore them to relationship with God through forgiving their sins. And the religious teachers are exactly right: only God can forgive sins!

Do you see how Mark has raised the ante? Do you see that Mark is telling us that Jesus is here on official business from God himself? Whatever Jesus does, it is God doing it. That's a strong statement to make, but it is exactly what Jesus is saying.

And then, conflict number two (2.13-17): Jesus heads to the home of a notorious sinner, a tax collector named Levi. Tax collectors were religious outsiders because they were scabs, Jewish men who had essentially sold out to the Roman Empire in order to collect taxes from their fellow Jews. They were rich because they collected more taxes

than were due, and they were lonely because no one wanted to be seen with them. Jews, especially the religious leaders, hated tax collectors because they saw them as unworthy of being called a Jew. Imagine their shock, then, when Jesus decides to have dinner with one!

What we find out from Jesus' interaction with Levi and his "sinner" friends is that this event is not an exception to Jesus' regular ministry schedule; rather, this is his ministry schedule. He has not come for the "righteous," those who think they have it all together and are getting along just fine in their religious world. No, Jesus came for the outsiders, the rejects, those who don't fit into the system. In fact, he's come to flip the system on its head!

The two sections immediately following Jesus' dinner with Levi serve to reinforce this crazy idea that Jesus is God's official agent of healing and forgiveness and that since he has come the old systems are revealed to be bankrupt. Conflict three (2.18-22) has to do with fasting, an important ritual to the religious leaders. The Pharisees fasted twice a week as a sign of their religious devotion, particularly as a sign of their longing for the Messiah to come. Do you sense the irony, then, in the question of the people? Why doesn't Jesus fast like the others? Fasting is a foreword looking ritual, done in anticipation of the coming Messiah; therefore, it is out of place when the Messiah shows up! When the Messiah comes, it is time to feast, as at a week-long wedding celebration! The "old wineskins" of religion cannot hold the new wine of forgiveness and healing in Jesus! The old religious rituals are no longer appropriate since Jesus has come!

In conflict four (2.23-28), in the story about Jesus and his disciples eating grain on the Sabbath, Jesus makes an even wilder claim. The Sabbath was a day of rest, instituted on day 7 of Creation, and a good gift that God gave to his people. Unfortunately, it had been turned into a religious rule; actually, it had been turned into 39 specific rules, and number 3 was that you couldn't pick grain! When Jesus and his disciples get caught breaking the rules, he responds with characteristically bold claims. First, Jesus references David, the greatest Old Testament king in order to justify his actions. All Israel knew that the Messiah would be the "son of David," and Jesus boldly takes on the title. Second, he makes a scandalous statement about being "lord of the Sabbath." In other words, he is the maker of the Sabbath and the one who gets to decide what happens on it!

Conflict five (3.1-6) is also about the Sabbath and escalates the tension between Jesus and the religious leaders to a whole new level. The Pharisees and the Herodians (supporters of Herod, an important and controversial political figure) begin to plot together to put Jesus to death. It is fascinating, and more than a little ironic, that their main complaint is that Jesus has healed a lame man on the Sabbath! Jesus' words are clearly aimed at them: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3.4) While Jesus is healing a man, they are plotting to kill one!

What has just happened in these five stories of conflict cannot be missed. Jesus has clearly, humbly, and boldly claimed to be the Lord, the rightful King of the Earth, the divine and authoritative representative of God himself! It is precisely because the relig-

because Jesus has paused to heal this woman, his daughter has died. If Jairus had any hope when he came to Jesus, it has surely been crushed completely.

So you can see why Mark puts the story of the woman in the middle. She exemplifies the kind of faith that Jairus must have if he wants to see his daughter alive again. "Do not fear, only believe" is the only response Jesus gives to Jairus upon the report of his daughter's death. In other words, "Believe like this woman, Jairus!" She is the model of the kind of faith Jesus responds to. She has heard, she comes, she reaches out; Jairus has heard, he has come – will he reach out to Jesus, or will he give in to fear?

Jesus heals her with a word and a touch, twice in this story defiling himself in order to make others well. But that is the ministry of Jesus: when we come to him in faith, he takes our sickness, our sin, and our death upon himself, absorbing it into himself, and then suffering and dying on the cross for it, so that we might have healing, joy, and life in his name!

Perhaps that is the point: in including the details, Mark is telling us what happened. Surely, if Mark wanted his gospel to be more believable, he could have taken out those details. He could have omitted them, as both Matthew and Luke later would. But he did not omit them, and so we are forced to wrestle with it. The healing of the demoniac cost the townspeople significantly – their entire livelihood! And it cost Jesus the opportunity to do more ministry in that area: “And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region” (Mark 5.17). So it was a costly work that Jesus performed.

But there is a more important reason, I think, that it all went down like that. This demoniac, a Gentile, the unclean of the unclean, becomes Jesus’ first missionary in Gentile territory! What are his qualifications for such a calling? Simply, he has no qualifications. None! That is good news for each of us. While few of us will have stories as radical as this man’s, each of us who have met Jesus and responded to his grace will have something to talk about. And like the demoniac, Jesus sends us home, to our families, our friends, our normal lives, to be his witnesses, telling the story of what he has done for us. You don’t have to be a theologian, you don’t have to understand everything, and you don’t have to have all the answers. All you have to do is go, tell, and invite: Go to your friends, tell them what the Lord has done for you, and invite them to see for themselves! Each of us who have met Jesus, who have experienced his grace and mercy, are now sent as his missionaries, not to far-off places on the globe, but to our neighborhoods, our workplaces, and our city. And our prayer is that our city would respond just as the demoniac’s city: “and everyone marveled.”

The rest of chapter five melds two important healing stories into one. The first story is interrupted by the second, and continues only after the second is completed. This is Mark’s way of teaching important truths about Jesus and about being his disciple. The story sandwiched in the middle is the key to understanding the story that surrounds it.

The first story is of a religious official named Jairus whose daughter is close to death, and the second is of a woman suffering from a menstrual hemorrhage. Though both come to Jesus for healing, their stories couldn’t be more different. Jairus is a religious official, chosen by the elders of the community to oversee the worship and teaching at the local synagogue. He was a respected man, revered for his piety, a person of status and privilege. The woman is the subject of shame and reproach, ritually unclean because of her disease, absolutely broke from having spent all her money on the attempts of physicians, and had been suffering for 12 years. Yet it is her story which Mark wants us to focus in on, and her response to Jesus is what defines the faith that Jairus needs in order to see his daughter healed.

Mark says that the woman has heard about Jesus, has come to him, and now reaches out to touch him. It is the essential definition of faith in Mark’s gospel. To hear, to come, to reach out – this is the response of a true disciple of Jesus! And when Jesus senses that he has healed her, he searches for her in the crowd and then listens while she tells him “the whole truth” (Mark 5.34). Certainly her story took a significant amount of time to tell, and Jairus is forced to wait while Jesus tenderly attends to the woman’s needs. And then, while he is still talking with the woman, report comes that the daughter is dead. Jairus has waited until the last moment to come to Jesus, and

ious leaders recognize what Jesus is claiming that they begin to publicly and demonstratively oppose Jesus.

Their conflict with him will continue to grow throughout the rest of the book, and it is clear from this chapter that Jesus didn’t make it any easier on them. He never holds back, he never shies away, and he never fails to proclaim who he is. And these leaders, who should have been the first to recognize and welcome the Messiah, are increasingly hostile toward him, his ministry, and his disciples.

The Healing of Forgiveness, Mark 2.1-12

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*Have you ever wanted something so desperately that you made yourself look foolish to get it?

*Why do you think these men brought their friend to Jesus? What were they hoping to have happen?

*When Jesus announces forgiveness, do you think the friends, and the man, were satisfied?

*Why does Jesus start with forgiving this man? Why not heal him first?

*When he is healed, what effect does the healing have on the crowd and the religious leaders?

*Are our deepest human needs emotional, physical, or spiritual? How does Jesus address all of them?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

chapter five

Commentary

If the experience of the disciples in the storm was about the difficult challenges that come to us in life, the very next story, the Garesene Demoniac, is about the storms that rage inside us. They are no less intense than that which rages about us.

Following the calming of the storm, Jesus arrives safely with his disciples “on the other side of the sea.” The situation that unfolds is one of the most striking and fantastic stories Mark recounts, and for that reason one of the most difficult for us to comprehend. There is a man possessed by demons – a whole Roman legion worth, numbering upwards of 5,600. He is, by every account, religiously and ceremoniously “unclean:” an outcast of society, living in an outcast region populated by people who herd pigs, the most unclean of animals. What a setting for the further development of Jesus’ ministry, his subversive, unorthodox, paradigm-breaking rescue mission!

The demoniac is beyond the pale, “one of the most lamentable stories of human wretchedness in the Bible” (Edwards, 154). The doctors are powerless to heal him. The religious authorities cannot cleanse him. The townspeople have attempted to bind him, but “no one had the strength to subdue him.” So it is all the more fascinating that this man comes running at Jesus and throws himself at Jesus’ feet. Before Jesus is close, before he can even say a word, he has subdued the man and his demons. They cry out before him, begging Jesus to not “torment” them. These demons have ravaged this man’s life, tormenting him for years, destroying his life, and suddenly they are worried for their own existence. Who then is this?

The fact that Jesus can subdue these demons should not completely surprise us at this point in the story. But it is an important story first for its sheer magnitude – the intensity of the man’s experience, the incredible number of demons inside him, the distance between this demoniac and “normal” society. In other words, Jesus’ authority extends to the farthest reaches of the imagination, reminding us that the storms raging inside us, no matter how intense, probably don’t come close to the experience of this man (at least we still have our clothes on). The story is also important because of the contrast between the previous and former state of the man. After the exorcism, the people are astounded because they “saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid” (Mark 5.15). The healing that Jesus performed was complete, a total transformation, a radical turnaround.

And then there is that whole ordeal about the pigs, prompting us to ask, “why?” Why do the demons beg for that? And why does Jesus allow it? And why does Mark include those details when they seem so, well, unbelievable?

The Lord of the Storm, Mark 4.35-41

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

- *What is one challenge that you are facing on a daily basis right now?
- *Do you think the disciples as “who is this?” because they know or don’t know who Jesus is?
- *Why do they refuse to believe though they have seen everything Jesus has done so far?
- *Read Psalm 107.23-32. Who is the storm calmer, and why is that significant to what Jesus does here?
- *Explore the implications of this: faith is believing Jesus is the Son of God, that you are in the boat with him, and that, no matter what it looks like, he is in control.
- *What difference would it make to believe this for the challenge that you mentioned above?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

Friendship and Feasting, Mark 2.13-22

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

- *What are the most despised professions today? Why? Do you know anyone in such a profession?
- *When Jesus calls Levi to follow, where does Jesus go? Is that significant?
- *How do you think Jesus’ disciples felt going into the home of such a notorious sinner?
- *If Jesus came to our city, whom do you think he would eat dinner with? Why?
- *Reflect on v.17. Which category do you think churchgoers fit into? What about you?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

The Lord of the Sabbath, Mark 2.23-3.6

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

- *Do you think Jesus would do things that would offend us if he came to our church or group?
- *Read Genesis 2.1-3 and Deuteronomy 5.12-15. What is the Sabbath and why is it important?
- *The Pharisees had 39 distinct Sabbath rules. Why are they offended by Jesus' actions?
- *What response does Jesus have to the people and the religious leaders? (see Jeremiah 23.5)
- *What is our relationship to the Law as Christians? Is it tossed out or still in affect, and to what degree?
- *How does being a disciple of Jesus affect our understanding & relationship to the Law?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

The Openness of the Kingdom, Mark 4.21-34

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

- *What is your favorite movie, and why? What is the point of the movie?
- *How many parables are here? (notice the "And he said..." lines) Look at other parables in Matt. 13.
- *Decode the parables in this section. How does knowing the parable of the Sower (see above) influence your understanding of these parables?
- *Parables are meant to be pondered. Choose one, commit it to memory, and chew on it this week.
- *If the seed grows without the farmers care, should the farmer just do nothing? Why or why not?
- *Who are the "birds of the air" that come to land in the mustard plant's branches?
- *Re-write a few parables using modern day elements instead of 1st Century elements.

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

The Seed of the Kingdom, Mark 4.1-20

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*Read the parable in 4.1-9. What do you observe? What do you think Jesus is trying to communicate?

*What is a parable, and what is its purpose? What does the quote from Isaiah mean?

*Decode this parable. Who is the Sower, what is the seed, what is the ground? How do you know?

*How is understanding this parable the key to understanding all the parables? (4.13)

*Has the “secret” of the kingdom been given to us, or just to those first disciples? What is the secret?

*Why do you think Mark includes Jesus’ explanation of the parable? Would you have guessed that explanation if you only had the original telling of the parable?

*What is your soil type? What areas does your life need to be cultivated to receive the word?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

chapter three

Commentary

Jesus is a busy man. Since his baptism in chapter 1 he has not stopped or even slowed down. You can almost feel the tension mounting in the 5 previous confrontations with the religious leaders, so it is no surprise that on the heels of the confrontations regarding the Sabbath, Jesus tries to get a little rest from the relentless pace of ministry. The crowds won’t let him.

The crowds are an interesting bunch in Mark, always chasing after Jesus but never really understanding him. In 3.7, as Jesus is trying to steal away with his disciples, the crowds come on strong. The cities Mark mentions are not close to Capernaum, where Jesus currently is: Idumea is over 120 miles south, while Tyre and Sidon are about 50 miles north. But beyond the geographic distance is the religious and ethnic diversity represented in these crowds: devout and religious Jews from Jerusalem, the non-Jewish regions of Tyre and Sidon, and the more religiously mixed areas of Idumea. Jesus’ fame is spreading beyond borders both political and ethnic.

Verses 7 through 12 function as a brief summary of the ministry of Jesus. John, another disciple of Jesus, author of the gospel of John, and the best friend of Jesus, wrote in his gospel: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21.25). That is a good summary of what these disciples experienced with Jesus, and Mark, by summarizing it here, is telling us the same thing. All this and more was the regular experiences of these first disciples of Jesus.

The summary of his ministry sets us up for the appointing of the 12 apostles in vs. 13-19. The work of the ministry was growing, and Jesus’ plan was to turn over some of the work to his disciples. This is the way apprenticeship works in most every profession. You begin by watching the master, taking notes, observing his techniques and skills. Slowly, he begins to hand over some of the work to you, allowing you to “get your hands dirty,” have some success and some failure, and get a feel for the skills needed. This is what Jesus is doing, and we know that these 12 men (minus Judas, who, after delivering Jesus over to the religious authorities, hung himself) become the primary leaders of the early church.

Jesus goes up on a mountain and calls to himself 12 men that he wants to be his apostles. We aren’t told how many disciples there were in total, but Jesus calls 12 from a larger group (possibly as many as 120) and appoints them “apostles,” which means “sent ones,” so they can preach and have authority to cast out demons; in other words, so that they can share the load of the ministry!

We shouldn’t see Jesus’ appointment of the twelve as an exception to the rule – this is the way being a disciple of Jesus works! He calls us first to be with him, and then to

speak and act as his representatives. To be a disciple is to be in a learning relationship with Jesus, following him, speaking the good news of salvation in him, and actively demonstrating it through deeds of hospitality, compassion, and justice.

If Mark is, as we have said, a “handbook for becoming a disciple,” this is an important development in the story-line. Discipleship is primarily a result of Jesus calling us to himself. It is not the disciples who choose Jesus; rather, Jesus “called to him those whom he desired... so that they might be with him” (Mark 3.1-14). First and foremost, discipleship is about being called to Jesus himself. It is not primarily about having the right doctrines and beliefs, about being moral or religious, or even about becoming like Jesus. Jesus doesn’t want servants, he wants “student-learners,” people who are drawn to him and learn from him how to live life as God designed it to be.

There are some “big names” at the beginning of the list, the guys who were closest to Jesus and who later became pillars in the early church. But there are also some nobodies about which we know close to nothing. And then, of course, there is Judas, who is only remembered as the one “who betrayed him.” It is good to remember that these are regular people whom Jesus calls to himself and through whom Jesus continues his work in the world. Discipleship is for ordinary men and women, people like you and I who don’t live spectacularly spiritual lives; people who fail often and find the grace of God to sustain us; and even for people whose lives seem to do greater damage than good to the cause of Christ.

But there are will always be those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus. In the rest of the chapter, Jesus takes on the wildest accusation yet: that he is not doing these miracles and casting out demons by the power of God but by the strength of Satan himself! Jesus reveals the absurdity of these statements (is Satan fighting himself?!) and takes the opportunity to teach about the dangers of hardening our hearts against him and wrongly attributing his power to Satan. “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness” is about as strong a statement as he could make. It certainly caused those who heard it to tremble as much as it causes us!

The “unforgivable sin,” as it has been called, has to do with an intentional and life-long resistance to God’s work in Jesus. It is one thing to honestly say about Jesus that we are uncertain and unconvinced, yet remain open to investigate; it is another thing entirely to attribute his work to Satan and refuse to investigate his claim. The latter, if persisted in until death, certainly bars us from eternity with God and the forgiveness he offers: How could God forgive one who never asks for it and who attributes the source of forgiveness to the devil?

It is interesting to note that the brackets to the discussion of the “unforgivable sin” have to do with Jesus and his family and close friends, a group of people who also did not understand who Jesus was. And while they did not attribute his power to Satan, they don’t do much better: “He is out of his mind!” (We’d say it like this: “He’s off his rocker!”) In response, Jesus takes the opportunity to teach about what it means to be a true disciple. The real family of Jesus – his closest confidants, friends, and companions – are those who are with him as disciples doing his work in the world.

no matter how much water the boat takes on and how large the waves become. If they really believed, then they would trust him.

It is a strong warning to us about the nature of true faith. The kind of faith that Scripture speaks of is not simply an intellectual assent to a few facts about Jesus. Faith is to first believe the fact of Jesus’ identity as the Son of God, and then to work that reality into every area of our storm-filled lives. Jesus is always in the boat with his disciples, and though he may seem to be sleeping, he is never – even for a moment – not in control of the storm. Do you believe that? Do you really believe that?

The simple reality is that we don’t believe it deeply and thoroughly enough. Our fears reveal that we believe something else; namely, that we are all alone in this boat. Our fears, anxieties, and concerns in life are a result of not believing that Jesus is the Son of God, he is with us, and he is in control. You see, storms like this one on the sea of Galilee were a very regular occurrence. This was not the first storm these fisherman had experienced, and it wouldn’t be the last; storms like this were a regular part of life. The “storms of life” are not only the huge, overwhelming, and difficult trials of life, though Jesus is certainly with you in those. The “storms” also include the daily experiences: the rash words of a friend or spouse, the tension and gossip of the workplace, roommate challenges, traffic delays, and piled-up dishes. Jesus is in those boats with you, and he loves you, and he is in control. Stake your life on it.

day he does his farming work, but that does not cause the seed to grow and become ripe grain; it happens completely without his intervention. But at harvest time, the crop is ready. The mustard plant's small seed grows in the garden to a shrub large enough for birds to make their homes. Both stories point to the expanding nature of the kingdom: this work that Jesus has begun will continue and many will be added-in until the end, when the harvest comes, and all those who have found "shade" are ushered in to meet the King!

Chapter four comes to a close with the first of a number of important and powerful miracles. Mark indicates that the story takes place at the end of a long day of teaching, and Jesus, exhausted, falls asleep in the boat on the way across the lake. Think about that for a minute: Jesus falls asleep in the boat. It is a fascinating statement, given the fact that Mark has shown us an almost invincible, unstoppable, constantly moving Messiah. The only place in Mark where Jesus sleeps is in a boat in the middle of a storm.

There are two interesting things going on with this story. First, Jesus is human. With all that has gone on in the previous chapters, it would be easy to think that Jesus sort of floated along a few inches off the ground, effortlessly accomplishing all that has gone on thus far. But it isn't true. Christians from the earliest days have vehemently held that Jesus is as much divine as he is human, though there have been many who are scandalized by the notion. Some want Jesus to be fully divine, as if life on earth was a bit of a game, a role he played but never really experienced. Others want Jesus to just be a man, and are quick to attempt to explain-away the miracles. But in this passage – and many like it – Jesus is clearly and unassumingly human.

But then there is the second thing, the part that makes even his disciples tremble with fear: Jesus silences a storm with three words. In all of human history, the story that most makes sense of this miracle is the story of creation, where God's Spirit hovered over the waters and then God spoke creation into existence. And the disciples, who have heard this story more times than they could ever count, quite obviously make this connection. What else could this mean? Jesus is divine, and the disciples have no idea what to do with him. Their response is nothing less than absolute terror. What do you do when you find yourself in a boat with the creator of heaven and earth?

Who then is this?

It is a question of unbelief: "Have you still no faith?" Jesus asks. They have seen all that Jesus has done, what he has taught, and the way in which he taught it, and they cannot put it all together. Actually, in light of the parables at the beginning, it isn't so much that they couldn't put it together if they wanted to. Rather, they don't want to put it all together. They, like the crowds, don't really want to hear. If you hear, then you are responsible: "Pay attention to the what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." It is a matter of faith, a matter of recognizing what is right in front of them, and therefore believing that Jesus is the Son of God. And if he is the Son of God, and he is in the boat with them, then there is no reason to be afraid of the storm,

With Jesus, Mark 3.7-19

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*Finish this sentence for yourself: "when things get difficult, I tend to..."

*The crowds often hinder Jesus – he's almost "crushed." Why does he continue to heal & deliver them?

*What's his main purpose for appointing the 12? What is significant about the number 12? (Gen 49.28)

*These 12 become Jesus' "insiders" (see Mark 4.10-11). What does Jesus give the insiders?

*Does Jesus really need the disciples' help? Why or why not?

*Jesus' disciples are anything but spectacular. How is that comforting to you?

*Jesus calls his disciples to a radically Jesus-centered way of life. How is that disconcerting to you?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

The Family of Jesus, Mark 3.20-35

Questions for Study, Reflection, and Discussion:

*These are some challenging verses. What have you heard might be the “unforgivable sin?”

*Who is accusing Jesus in this passage, and what are the actual accusations being made?

*How does Jesus respond to each group of people and their accusations?

*Do you know people (are you one?) who level these sorts of accusations at Jesus & his followers today?

*After reading & studying the passage, how would you define “the unforgivable sin?”

*What can we say to people who think that they have committed this sin and can’t be forgiven?

Notes:

Questions, Concerns, & Doubts:

chapter four

Commentary

Mark is not all that interested in recording the content of Jesus’ teaching. He has told us again and again that Jesus both preached and taught, both in the synagogue and in the field. And while he has recorded some of the words Jesus exchanged with his detractors, Mark has not given us much about the actual content of his teaching. Finally, in chapter four, we get our first look at both the content and the style of Jesus’ teaching. Prepare to be surprised.

Jesus is a storyteller living in a time of overwhelming illiteracy. Some estimate that as little as 10-15% of people could read and write, so it was imperative that the stories that Jesus told could be easily remembered and recounted. So he uses examples and stories drawn from the agricultural setting in which he was in. “Parables were the public persona of Jesus the teacher. By means of graphic images from everyday life, Jesus teased, tantalized, and tested his audiences, inviting them to an insider experience of the kingdom and of fellowship with himself” (The Gospel of Mark, James R. Edwards, 146).

The key to Jesus’ teaching is always Jesus himself. He is the point, the central character, the means by which the parable is unlocked. For example, after telling the parable of the Sower in 4.1-9, Mark includes a later experience in which the disciples asked Jesus about the parables, in which Jesus explains that the disciples have been given “the secret of the kingdom of God.” This “secret” is Jesus himself, the lamp brought in to give the light of illumination and understanding (v.21-23)!

In his explanation of the Sower parable in vs.13-20, Jesus explains that he is the one who “sows the word.” The different soils are the “hearers,” those who receive the word. The condition of the soil determines the ability to hear the word and therefore the ability to produce a crop. Those who don’t listen well are easily destroyed by Satan, hard times, or the deceitfulness of riches. But those who hear the word and accept it (could be translated “delight in it”) will produce a bumper crop of extraordinary proportions!

In each of these parables, the emphasis is on the ability of those listening to actually “hear” what Jesus is saying. This is exactly what Jesus is highlighting in the (somewhat loose) quote from Isaiah 6.9-10. Some will listen and listen and listen, and never hear, never understand, and never receive the word. It all comes down to what you do with Jesus. You cannot have understanding in these parables, you cannot have the kingdom, and you cannot have a “bumper crop” unless you hear Jesus, bring him in, and make him the key to your life. “Pay attention to what you hear!”

The two parables in vs.26-32 are designed to surprise. Both speak of a small and obscure beginning and end with the unexpected. A farmer plants his seeds, and day after