

Mark 1–8



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1 The good news of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1-15)

Welcome to this series in Mark's Gospel. We're hearing messages from Mark on Sundays at Riverview, and this series is your opportunity to take it further.

This term, we're covering the first half of Mark. There's a natural break in the middle of the book, so it will work well to pick up the second half next term (Aug/Sept).

Mark 1–8 focuses on who Jesus is. People are amazed at his authority, but they're unclear about his identity. "*Who is this?*" they keep asking. This question comes into focus as Jesus asks his disciples, "*What about you? Who do you say I am?*" Peter's response nails it: "*You are the Messiah.*" (Mark 8:29)

From that point, Mark turns to the question of what kind of Messiah Jesus will be. *Messiah* means anointed ruler, as David was in Old Testament times. But Jesus' kingship doesn't look like David's. David was celebrated for killing tens of thousands of enemies (1 Samuel 18:7; 21:11; 29:5), but Jesus is killed by his enemies. As soon as Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, Jesus starts talking about the cross (Mark 8:30–9:1). Our whole course next term (Mark 9–16) centres around the cross.

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. It was probably written before the others, perhaps in the AD 60s. All four Gospels are unsigned, but the early church said Mark wrote this book in Rome, based on Peter's memories. Almost all the events of Mark's Gospel are found in the others too, especially in Matthew and Luke.

The text of Mark's Gospel is 2000 years old, so I want to take you back to the first century, to hear it as Jesus' audience would have heard his words. Only when we understand what Jesus was saying to them can we appreciate what Jesus is saying to us.

So, each week, as you walk through that door, imagine you've entered a time machine that transports you back. Imagine you live in Capernaum, on the shores of the lake.

You know some of the fishermen. You've heard of a prophet named John proclaiming that God has sent someone to save his people. Are you curious? Want to know more?

Can you hear the expectation among the people? Can you feel their hopes and fears? Their afflictions and pain? Their faith and doubts? They identify as God's people, but it's been so long since they lived as God's nation ... hundreds of years! Mark says the arrival of Jesus the Messiah is *good news*.

Tonight we'll read the first fifteen verses, and ask seven questions:

- What does it mean to call Jesus *the Christ*? (1:1)
- What is *the gospel*? (1:1)
- Why does Mark call on the testimony of Isaiah and John the Baptist? (1:2-8)
- What message did John the Baptist proclaim? (1:4-8)
- If baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, why was Jesus baptized? (1:9-13)
- Why did the Spirit lead Jesus into temptation? (1:12-13)
- What was the gospel Jesus proclaimed? (1:14-15)

1.1 What does it mean to call Jesus “the Christ”? (1:1)

Mark's opening statement tells us what this book is all about:

Mark 1:1 (NIV)

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, [the Son of God].

This is a biography.¹ The key thing to say about Jesus is that he is the *Messiah* (NIV) or *Christ* (ESV). What does that mean?

In the language Mark used (Greek), *christos* was the word for “anointed.” Kings and priests were anointed representatives of the LORD on earth. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), the Hebrew word *messiah* was translated as *christos*. So, what does Mark mean by calling Jesus the *anointed* one?

After the exile, Jews rebuilt the temple and anointed priests. They had priests, but no king. Previously, David's descendants were anointed to represent God's reign on earth. After the kingdom fell, there was no anointed king.

Mark says Jesus is the anointed ruler they had waited 600 years to receive. Mark is telling us how this king restores the kingdom of God to the earth.

The phrase *Son of God* is present in some early copies of Mark 1:1, but not all. Did some copyists accidentally leave it out? Or did a copyist think it needed to be added? We don't know. We do know that Jesus is God's Son (compare 3:11; 15:39).

If *Son of God* is in this verse, it's parallel to *Messiah*. David's dynasty received the kingship as *sons* reigning for their *Father* in the heavens (2 Samuel 7:12-14). On coronation day, the king proclaimed God's decree: “*You are my son; today I have become your father*” (Psalm 2:7). *Son of God* meant *anointed ruler* (as in Psalm 2:2).

Don't misunderstand: I'm not denying that Jesus is the second person of the **trinity**. The doctrine of the trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three-in-one) was formulated in later centuries. Theologically, that's correct, but it's not the point Mark was making in the first century.

Christology (the study of Christ) tends to focus on the trinity. We've lost the meaning of *Christ* as Messianic king. Joshua Jipp recently did a PhD on what the term *Christ* means throughout the New Testament (500+ times). He says:

Mark's Gospel depicts the Messiah as God's Son who inaugurates and establishes God's reign through his life, suffering, and death on the cross. Jesus is triumphant in his war against the realm of the demonic, provides compassionate benefactions for the people, and not only serves the good of his people but even willingly lays down his life to rescue his subjects.²

Mark 1:1 calls Jesus *the Messiah*. This is *good news* (NIV), *the gospel* (ESV).

¹ Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Baylor U. P., 2018).

² Joshua W. Jipp, *The Messianic Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 84.

1.2 What is “the gospel”? (1:1)

If the church I grew up in held a “gospel” service, they were inviting unsaved people to give their hearts to Jesus. The *gospel* was a call to personal salvation.

For others, the “gospel” is that God justifies sinners by faith. *Justification by faith* is a key part of Paul’s message in Romans and Galatians.

But if that’s what *gospel* means, then Mark’s book is not about the gospel, and Jesus did not proclaim the gospel. Mark never mentions justification. Jesus never gave an invitation for people to ask him into their hearts or to pray the prayer for salvation.

Mark believed what he was writing was *the gospel*. Some today don’t believe him. Scot McKnight put it the problem like this:

At an airport, I bumped into a pastor I recognized ... He asked me what I was writing, and I replied, “A book about the meaning of gospel.”

“That’s easy,” he said, “justification by faith.” After hearing that quick-and-easy answer, I decided to push further, so I asked him ... “Did Jesus preach the gospel?”

His answer made me gulp. “Nope,” he said, “Jesus couldn’t have. No one understood the gospel until Paul. No one *could* understand the gospel until after the cross and resurrection and Pentecost.”

“Not even Jesus?” I asked.

“Nope. Not possible.”³

The good news of Jesus the Messiah was an outlandish claim, especially if Mark was writing in Rome. Everyone could see Caesar was appointed by the gods to run the world. Caesar said he claimed to rule by divine right. You died if you would not say, “Caesar is Lord!”



First century coin. Face *Caesar Augustus*. Back: *Divine Julius*
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coinage_reform_of_Augustus

When Julius Caesar was murdered in 27 BC, the Senate declared him to be a god. His son Augustus became emperor, so he claimed to be the son of a god. *Anointed ruler*, *son of a god*, *Saviour*, and *Lord* were all titles Caesar claimed.

Rome used the word *gospel* to describe how fortunate you were to be in Caesar’s reign. Mark opens with the phrase used on an inscription found at Priene (Türkiye):

In an inscription from Priene the birth of Augustus is described as marking for the world “the beginning of good news,” since he has come as “a saviour who put an end to war.”⁴

³ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*, (Zondervan, 2016), 25–26.

⁴ P. Oakes, “Rome,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 816.

Mark is writing a counter-narrative, confronting the dominant political claims of his world. You could be arrested for announcing the *good news* of *Jesus* as the divinely *anointed* ruler, *the Son* raised up by God as the *Saviour* who releases the world from the reign of evil, restoring it as a kingdom of heaven.

It's for this claim that *the king of the Jews* is arrested and crucified (Mark 14:61; 15:25-32). Pilate knew it was a set up (13:10), and the officer in charge of his execution declared, "Surely this man was the Son of God" (15:39). Around the time Mark was writing his Gospel (AD 60s), many others were also killed for this gospel, including Peter and Paul.

1.3 Why quote Isaiah and John the Baptist? (1:2-8)

To declare someone as God's anointed ruler, you needed a prophet to say so:

- Samuel anointed Saul and David (1 Samuel 9:16; 16:12-13).
- Nathan anointed Solomon (1 Kings 1:34).
- Elijah, Elisha, and Jehoiada anointed kings (1 Kg 19:15-16; 2 Kg 9:3-6; 11:12).
- Nehemiah was accused of getting prophets to proclaim him king (Neh 6:5-7).

John the Baptist was the prophet who announced Jesus as king (1:7). That was dangerous, since Herod claimed to be king. John doesn't live in town where Herod can find him. He doesn't shop for clothes or food. John lives in the wild, surviving on bush tucker and making his clothing from dead camels as previous prophets had done (2 Kings 1:8). Even so, Herod catches up with John (1:14), and we know how that ends (Mark 6:14-28). Proclaiming *the good news of Jesus the Messiah* was life-threatening.

John's testimony about Jesus' kingship finds confirmation in an earlier prophet:

Mark 1:2-3 (NIV)

² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—

³ "a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' "

Isaiah 40:3 promised *a voice in the wilderness*. This voice was calling God's people to prepare themselves for the LORD to come and reign over them again.

When you find an Old Testament quote in the New, check the **context**. Isaiah had just announced the exile, the end of the kingship: "*Your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs [unable to bear future kings] in the palace of the king of Babylon*" (Isaiah 39:7).

Then Isaiah 40 says that after the exile they'd rebuild Jerusalem (Zion). The LORD would come to reign over them again:

Isaiah 40:9-10 (NIV)

⁹ You who bring **good news** to Zion, go up on a high mountain.
 You who bring **good news** to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout,
 lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!”
¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
 and he rules with a mighty arm.

This is why we use the word *gospel*. Mark used the same word found in Isaiah 40:9-10; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1 (Septuagint). That's how Isaiah 40:3 was understood in the first century. Others also called themselves *a voice in the wilderness*, most notably the community in Qumran that hid their scrolls in caves (the Dead Sea Scrolls).

In summary, the gospel is the good news that God's reign (the kingdom of God) has been restored in Jesus the Messiah, the anointed ruler, the Son who saves us from the dominion of evil and restores his Father's reign to the earth.

1.4 What message did John proclaim? (1:4-8)**Mark 1:4-5 (NIV)**

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

John was the final of prophet of the old covenant. What would *repentance and forgiveness of sins* have meant to *the whole region of Judea and all Jerusalem*?

They'd gone into exile because they refused to live under God's leadership. But God told them if they'd return to him, he would return to reign over them: “*Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the LORD Almighty.*” (Zechariah 1:3).

Repentance meant turning from rebellion against the LORD'S authority, submitting to the LORD'S authority. This reorientation opens the way for **forgiveness of sins**. *Forgiveness* means releasing someone from what they owe you. God releases us from rebellion against his kingship, to live under his authority.

And that's what Isaiah 40 promised to a people crushed by other powers. Forgiveness meant God releasing them from oppression, restoring them to his reign: “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins*” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

If *Judea and Jerusalem* were *confessing their sins*, the nation was no longer refusing to be a kingdom of God. In asking John to cleanse them, they were preparing the way for God to come and reign over them again.

That's the best way to understand John's baptism. As the son of a priest (Luke 1:5-26), John understood the various ritual cleansings required by the Torah (e.g. Leviticus 11:32; 14:8-9, 52; 15:5-27; 16:4, 24; 17:15; 22:6). He was cleansing the nation in preparation for God's reign.

Ritual cleansing baths called *miqvot* (singular *miqveh*) were common in first century Palestine. But John's cleaning ritual was specific, preparing the people for the coming king:

Mark 1:7-8 (NIV)

⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John recognized his baptism was just a symbol. The real cleansing comes as people recognize the Messiah God sent them. King Jesus does more than a symbolic wash with water; he cleanses with the life-changing power of the *Holy Spirit*.



Steps down to the miqveh at Qumran
Photo: Allen Browne, 2017.

In Pentecostal circles, "baptism with the Holy Spirit" is regarded as a second blessing, separate from salvation, often associated with speaking in tongues. In the New Testament, this phrase is always used to contrast John's and Jesus' ministries.⁵ John was an Old Testament prophet performing a symbolic washing, while Jesus provides the actual cleansing for the people of God, regenerated through the Holy Spirit.

1.5 Why was Jesus baptized? (1:9-13)

If baptism was *for the forgiveness of sins* (verse 4), why was Jesus baptized?

Mark 1:9 (NIV)

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

Since we think of an individual's sins, it makes no sense for Jesus to request baptism. That's not what Mark is talking about. It's about the fallen nation: *all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him ... confessing their sins* (verse 5 ESV). *The country of Judea* had gone into exile because of their sins (rebellion against God's leadership). Six hundred years later, God had not restored them as his kingdom. Now the whole country of Judea and the capital were collectively confessing they'd resisted God. They want to live under God's reign again.

It's like Daniel's prayer in exile: "*We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws*"

⁵ See Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 11:16. 1 Corinthians 12:13 is not describing Jesus' ministry (baptizing us with the Spirit); it's about the Holy Spirit baptizing us into the Messiah as his corporate presence.

(Daniel 9:5). Daniel wasn't speaking of his personal sins; he was asking God to forgive and restore his nation.

As their God-appointed king, Jesus was identifying with the failures of his suffering people, taking responsibility for the sins of his people. By the end of Mark's Gospel, we will see Jesus doing exactly that: carrying in his own body the sins of his people.

But Jesus doesn't tell his people he is king. He joins the queue like everyone else, waiting to be baptized on their behalf. He identifies with his fallen people, taking their failure on himself.

Jesus was not very good at promoting himself. Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great did a much better job of telling everyone who was ruling the known world. Violence and oppression comes from people grasping power.



Traditional site of John's baptism, Jordan River, Judea.
Photo: Allen Browne, 2017.

Jesus takes the more difficult path, waiting for God to give him the kingship. People will reject him, giving him a humiliating, torturous death. He trusts God to raise him up over all the peoples of the earth. Power is given by God, not taken by humans.

So Jesus joins John's queue. He identifies with his fallen people. He waits for God to reveal the authority he is to receive as the Messiah, the Son of the heavenly sovereign:

Mark 1:10-11 (NIV)

¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

¹¹ And a voice came from heaven:

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

The God who spoke to his people through his prophets (Isaiah, John the Baptist) has taken the extraordinary step of speaking directly from heaven! This voice is the ultimate testimony Mark presents to support *the good news about Jesus the Messiah*.

Jesus is the beloved Son to whom God has given the kingship. If the Son is pleasing to the Father, all who come to life in him live in pleasing relationship with Father also.

1.6 Why did the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness? (1:12-13)

Mark 1:12-13 (NIV)

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Does the Holy Spirit lead us into temptation? Jesus' brother tells us that *God does not tempt anyone*. (James 1:13).

Again, the problem comes when I treat the text as all about me. Jesus has just been anointed as the Christ appointed by heaven to lead his people. *The Spirit descended on him like a dove* (1:9) with the accompanying declaration by his Father (1:10).

It's as the leader of God's people that Jesus faced the enemy on behalf of his people. Straight after David was anointed as God's chosen leader (1 Samuel 16), he faced Goliath on behalf of his people (1 Samuel 17). After the exile, as they were ruled by kingdom after kingdom, the Jews realized there was an Enemy behind their enemies, The Hebrew word for enemy is *śā·ṭān*. This *Śā·ṭān* wanted to keep God's people oppressed to prevent God bringing salvation to the world through them (e.g. Zechariah 3:1). The Spirit led Jesus into the confrontation with this Enemy.

When rulers fight each other for power, they're serving Satan. To be human is to reflect God's image to the world (Genesis 1:26-28), but warring rulers who take power by force are more like wild beasts. That's how Daniel saw them as he heard that one day the heavenly sovereign would take power from the *beasts* and give it to someone like a *son of man* (Daniel 7:1-14).

The son of man is Jesus (Mark 2:10, 28: 8:31; 38; 9:9, 12, 31 etc). But what happens when someone like a human is *led into the wilderness* where *the wild beasts* rule by tearing their prey apart? Will this story end badly? Will the Enemy kill him?

Jesus is not alone in this fight. Heavenly messengers (*angels*) attend him. As Jesus faces the wild beasts, he has the support of the heavenly realm.

That's the reason Jesus does not fight against the rulers appointed by Rome. Herod ruled Galilee. Instead, Jesus withdraws: *after John was put into prison, Jesus went into Galilee* (1:14). For Jesus, Herod was not the enemy—merely a tool of the Enemy. Flesh-and-blood people are never our enemy (Ephesians 6:12). There's no point trying to bring Herod down when the good news is that God has anointed Jesus to reign.

1.7 What was the gospel according to Jesus? (1:14-15)

Mark 1:14-15 (NIV)

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the **good news** of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the **good news!**”

What is *God's gospel* (verse 14)? What good news announcement is God making for the world? We don't often talk about *God's gospel*, but the New Testament does.⁶ Paul speaks of *God's gospel* as the good news God promised through prophets like Isaiah, the good news that a physical descendant of David would bring heaven's reign

⁶ See Mark 1:1; Romans 1:1; 15:16; 2 Corinthians 11:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 8, 9; 1 Peter 4:17.

back to the earth. God's good news was his declaration that he'd placed his Son in power by raising him from the dead (Romans 1:1-4).

God's gospel is the message God spoke at Jesus' baptism, that Jesus is the beloved Son who pleases his Father, empowered by heaven to reign in the earthly realm (1:11).

The kingdom of God (verse 15) is Jesus' main message.⁷ But Jesus never claims the kingship for himself. He receives it by his Father's declaration: *the good news of God*.

If *the kingdom of God has come near*, it's because the king has come near. After 600 years with no king, *the time had come* because the uncrowned Messiah was right there.

Jesus calls them to **turn and trust the good news** (verse 15):

- **Repent** means to reorient, to turn from resisting to recognizing God's authority. The kingdom fell when they rejected God's reign (2 Kings 17:14-20; 21:10-16). For the kingdom to be restored they must turn and recognize the king God has given them.
- **Believe the gospel** means to trust God's good-news proclamation that his anointed (his *Christ*) is our ruler (our *Lord*), that in his leadership the earth has been restored as a kingdom of heaven. To believe the gospel is to trust God's Christ to lead us, to give him our allegiance.⁸

In recent centuries, Christians have divided over what *the kingdom of God* means. Some think God's kingdom is already here. Others think the kingdom of God won't arrive until Jesus returns to reign. The truth is it's "already, but not yet." The kingdom is already here because the king is here, but the kingdom is not fully here yet because not everyone recognizes his kingship.

The important question is not "When is the kingdom?" but "What is the kingdom?" It's the reign of heaven, being restored to earth in the Messiah. For all who recognize God's Christ as our Lord, the kingdom has come near.

1.8 Conclusion

From the first fifteen verses of Mark's Gospel, we asked seven questions. Did you find this a useful way to clarify your understanding of what the text was saying? Has this approach given you more insight into Jesus' baptism and anointing, and God's proclamation of the gospel that he has appointed his Christ as our Lord? Are you making sense of the gospel Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God has come near? Is this how you have always understood *the gospel of Jesus the Messiah* (1:1), or is Marks's account of the kingdom of God arriving in him reframing the gospel for you? What is still unclear for you?

⁷ See Mark 1:15; 3:24; 4:11, 26, 30; 6:23; 9:1, 27; 10:14-15; 23-25; 11:10; 12:34; 14:25; 15:43.

⁸ See Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Baker Academic, 2017) and *Gospel Allegiance: What Faith in Jesus Misses for Salvation in Christ* (Brazos, 2019).

There's so much more in the Gospel of Mark about the authority God has given to Christ Jesus, and his unique, sacrificial leadership changes life on earth. Mark Keown from Auckland gives us this taste of what Mark will serve up in the coming chapters:

Mark's Gospel is a fast-moving presentation of the life of Jesus. Mark does not focus on Jesus' childhood, and instead launches his story with John the Baptist—the prophets are back. Jesus emerges to be baptized by John, anointed as the Servant King. The agenda is declared in Mark 1:14–15; “the kingdom of God” is breaking in. Israel and the world are summoned to repent and believe. Jesus then launches into ministry, gathering an assortment of young men to be his disciples. They join him, likely in the hope that Jesus will lead them to liberate their nation from Roman rule. Through the first half of Mark, Jesus enacts the kingdom, inviting his disciples and people to recognize his kingship. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter confesses Jesus' messiahship, the turning point of the gospel. From this moment, Jesus teaches them what kind of Messiah he is and what it means to be a subject of the kingdom. The disciples struggle to grasp that he is a humble servant who must die to bring redemption. They grapple with what the life of a person in this kingdom should look like—a life of cross-bearing love. The gospel climaxes with the horror of Jesus' betrayal, trial, and death. It ends with his disciples nowhere to be seen and the women at the tomb bewildered and fearful. What has happened? Who is this man? It is clear Mark knows, and his readers are challenged to come to their own conclusion.⁹

In preparation for next week, please **read Mark 1:16–2:12**.

⁹ Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes: The Gospels & Acts*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 1:128.

2 The authority given to Jesus (Mark 1:16–2:12)

Mark's Gospel opens by announcing *the gospel of Jesus the Messiah* (1:1). It's God's gospel (1:14) because God proclaims his Son is now in charge of the world.

Isaiah had promised this restoration of God's reign, and John the Baptist prepared the people for this good news. (1:2-8). Heaven affirmed Jesus as anointed ruler (Messiah): the Spirit fell on him, and the Father proclaimed Jesus as his pleasing Son (1:10-11).

So, Jesus echoed God's gospel: this was the time God would release his people from serving other powers to be a kingdom of God. Jesus called everyone to turn and trust the good news God had proclaimed (1:14-15).

Any questions from last week before we continue with Mark 1–2?

2.1 How does Jesus' authority relate to us? (1:16-20)

Heaven's authority over earth is the opening message of the Bible: "*God said ... and it was so*" (Genesis 1:3, 6-7, 9, 11, 14-15). We are children in our Father's likeness, partners expressing his dominion in the earthly realm (Genesis 1:26-28).

But trusting us with his authority wasn't a safe choice. We want to be gods (Genesis 3:5). We try to take heaven's power into human hands (Genesis 11:4). All the harm and violence of history comes from people misusing power to control each other.

So, when Jesus comes as anointed king, does he keep God's power from us? Or does he share his authority with us? What's the first thing Jesus does?

Mark 1:16-20 (NIV)

¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

¹⁷ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. ²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.



The Sea of Galilee. (Photo: Allen Browne, 2014)

“

Lake Galilee is fresh water, so it's not really a *sea* (salt water). Fishing was big business in all the towns around Lake Galilee. It was hard work, but they made a good living. There was a fish-salting factory in Migdol (Mary Magdalene's town).

But fishermen were not the political elite. They didn't hobnob with Herod. They weren't trained in law. They had one skill, passed down through generations, learned through rugged experience. So, Jesus connected with what they knew, using fishing as an analogy of the responsibility he was sharing with them.

God's gospel is that he has given the kingship to his Son. But how do the peoples of the earth hear this good news? God calls us into partnership with him, to echo his good news that is Christ is our Lord. So just as Jesus was proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, he calls his followers to announce God's gospel to the peoples of the earth.

That's quite a career change! They left their nets to be **public servants of King Jesus**.

2.2 What authority does a king have in the kingdom? (1:21-28)

Capernaum was a town on the north-west shores of Galilee. It had a large *synagogue* where the people met each *Sabbath* (Saturday). As a Jew, Jesus lived under the Torah (Galatians 4:4). Each Saturday he stopped work like everyone else, gathering with his people in the local synagogue to share his kingdom vision with them.



Capernaum Synagogue: remains from 2nd century AD. Allen Browne, 2017.

Mark 1:21-22 (NIV)

²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had **authority**, not as the teachers of the law [scribes].

After the kingdom fell (586 BC), Ezra and others led groups of Jews back to rebuild Jerusalem. Ezra was a **scribe**, a Bible scholar who *read the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read* (as Nehemiah 8:1, 8). This is the background of the word in verse 22, *scribes* (ESV) or *teachers of the law* (NIV). Scribes were Bible scholars who explained what the Torah as asking of the covenant people.

Some Bible teachers today have not understood the authority Jesus has. They like to see themselves as teaching with authority (not like other Bible teachers). Mark is saying that Jesus had **the authority of a king**, not merely a Torah instructor. The king has authority to tell the kingdom what to do. The king can say, "You have heard that it

was said ..., but I tell you ...” (Matthew 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). That’s what was amazing about Jesus’ authority (Matthew 7:28-29).

The arrival of Jesus’ regal authority is good news for God’s people, but it’s deeply disturbing for the powers of evil that have been oppressing them:

Mark 1:23-24 (NIV)

²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, ²⁴ “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

The anointing of the Spirit has led Jesus into conflict with the Satan (1:10-13). The Satan had other spirits working to hold the people in an impure state so they could not be restored as God’s nation.¹⁰ The Law provided rituals to cleanse the impure person, but the impurity would spread if the impure person was in contact with others. By bringing an impure spirit into the synagogue, this man was polluting the community. Spiritual pollution from impure spirits is therefore part of what the Messiah had to deal with to save his people.

As their Messiah, Jesus has the authority to cleanse his people:

Mark 1:25-28 (NIV)

²⁵ “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” ²⁶ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with **authority!**

He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.”

²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

The Gospels describe many encounters with demons. The demons were terrified of Jesus’ authority. He threatened their attempts to keep Israel oppressed, so they feared *the Holy One of God*, the God-anointed king who had come to rescue his people and could not be turned against the heavenly sovereign.¹¹

Jewish exorcists sometimes had elaborate routines for trapping demons. This example is from Tobit (a deuterocanonical book in the Roman Catholic Bible):

Tobit 8:2-3 (English Standard Version, Catholic Edition)

² Tobias ... took the fish’s liver and the heart out of the sack where he had been keeping them and put them upon the live ashes in the incense burner. ³ And the odour of the fish exercised a restraining force and the demon flew upward to the districts of Egypt, and [angel] Raphael went and ensnared him there and bound him at once.

¹⁰ “Impure” was state of uncleanness that resulted from eating non-kosher food, touching a dead body etc. (Leviticus 11). Compare Satan’s accusations against God’s servant the high priest in Zechariah 3:1-5).

¹¹ This is the counterpart on earth to *the Holy One of Israel* (Isaiah 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3, 14 etc).

By contrast, Jesus has the authority to merely speak a word, and the demons leave. If people imagined strategies like using a smelly fish to dislodge a demon so an angel could catch it, you can understand them being *amazed* at Jesus' *authority*. *He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him* (verse 27).

Regarding demons today, I suggest that our place in Christ is radically different from the struggles the Jewish people faced after they went into exile and found themselves serving foreign powers. At the cross Jesus unseated Satan (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), so demons do not have authority over believers who are in Christ. There's no case of a demon being cast out of a Christian anywhere in Acts or the New Testament letters, though the demonic realm is certainly at work in those who oppose the gospel (e.g. Acts 11:6-12; 1 Corinthians 10:21; 1 Timothy 4:1).

2.3 How does King Jesus care for his subjects? (1:29-34)

Most of Jesus' time is taken up with releasing his people from their sufferings:

Mark 1:29-31 (NIV)

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. ³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. ³¹ So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

Simon Peter was married. That's a problem for Roman Catholics who regard Peter as the first pope. Catholicism has always regarded sex as less than ideal, but Paul says that Peter (Cephas) used to take his wife with him on his travels (1 Corinthians 9:5). The Pastoral Epistles are fine with church leaders being married (1 Timothy 3:1, 12). They're not fine with *forbidding people to marry* (1 Timothy 4:3).

Peter's mother-in-law was *in bed with a fever*, unable to take care of all the guests that had suddenly descended on her house. She didn't have the energy to get out of bed. *Jesus took her by the hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on all those guests.*

How many others in Capernaum were also suffering?

Mark 1:32-34 (NIV)

³² That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered at the door, ³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

The scale of the need is enormous! Everywhere he goes, the king will be asked to free his people from all that afflicts them. Peter summarized Jesus' ministry like this:

Acts 10:37-38 (NIV)

³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

Heaven's authority was *with him*, and Jesus used that authority to save his people from every form of oppression by *the devil*. Devil means “slanderer.” The devil accused God's people of being unfit to be a kingdom of God. On that basis, the devil had held them captive for centuries. In every town, Jesus set his people free from all these forms of oppression, demonstrating how the leadership of the Christ would save his people and the world.

This is not how other rulers operate. King Herod spent a fortune building palaces for his own comfort, enlisting cohorts of guards to ensure his protection. Herod built countless fortresses where he could flee if the people turned against him, at Herodium, Hyrcania, Alexandrium, Cypros, Masada, and Machaerus for example.¹²

King Jesus spent nothing on palaces, fortresses, or guards to save himself. He gave himself to save his people. To this day, the world has never seen a leader like Jesus.

2.4 Why didn't Jesus capitalize on his popularity? (1:35-39)

Politics is about popularity. The goal is to get elected again. The policies of political parties are decided by surveys and focus groups. It feels like politicians will stand for whatever people will fall for.

Jesus' popularity was already off the scale. By genuinely caring for people and dealing with their sufferings, Jesus is the most popular person in town. So why doesn't he seize the day, capitalize on the moment, and ride the wave while the surf is good?

Mark 1:35-39 (NIV)

³⁵ Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. ³⁶ Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷ and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”

³⁸ Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” ³⁹ So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

Jesus' agenda was to please the Father (1:11). Conversation with his Father draws Jesus' attention to the scope of his kingship. It's not just Capernaum. All of Galilee needs to hear this good news. So do Judea and Samaria and the world beyond.

¹² Paul H. Wright, *Understanding the New Testament: An Introductory Atlas*, (Carta Jerusalem, 2019), 18

Jesus leaves the place of popularity because he has a clear vision of why he has been sent. His message is that the kingdom of God is being restored to the earth through the authority entrusted to the Christ. That's what the healings, exorcisms, and shepherd love for his flock were all about. Other towns need to know this as well. Jesus hits the road, proclaiming and enacting the demise of evil and the restoration of heaven's reign.

2.5 Why does Jesus touch uncleanness? (1:40-45)

You might expect Jesus to scrupulously avoid touching anything that the Torah regarded as unclean, things like leprosy, unstemmed bleeding, and death. He doesn't.

Leprosy covered a range of skin diseases that spread through touch, so lepers were isolated from communal life. It was more than a medical quarantine: the Law regarded lepers as ritually unclean, a symbol of how uncleanness spreads among God's people:

Leviticus 13:44-46 (NIV)

⁴⁴ The priest shall pronounce him **unclean** because of the sore ...

⁴⁵ Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, **'Unclean! Unclean!'** ⁴⁶ As long as they have the disease they remain **unclean**. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.

Jesus had authority to heal his people from *various diseases* (1:33). Jesus had authority to free his people from *impure spirits* (1:27). Did Jesus have authority to cleanse his people from the life-destroying *uncleanness* of leprosy as well?

Mark 1:40-42 (NIV)

⁴⁰ A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me **clean**."

⁴¹ Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and **touched** the man. "I am willing," he said. "**Be clean!**" ⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was **cleansed**.

Hang on! Jesus *touched* the leper (verse 41)? Whatever the crowds were expecting, it wasn't that. According to the Law, anyone who touched what was unclean, became unclean (Leviticus 15:5, 7, 10, 11, 19-24, 17). Counterintuitively, instead of Jesus becoming unclean, the leper became clean!

The world doesn't work like that. If a mechanic wipes his face with an oily rag, does his face become oily, or does the rag become clean?



Jesus has authority to undo the uncleanness of the world. For hundreds of years since they had gone into exile, the people of God were unclean, living like lepers in foreign communities instead of living as the holy people of God.

Yet, here is the heaven-anointed king with authority to undo the uncleanness on earth, to remove the sins and exile his people had known for hundreds of years, to flood the world with the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in a way Old Testament cleansing rituals could never do (Mark 1:4-8).

The Messiah who cleanses the exile of a leper is the Messiah who removes the uncleanness of the earth, remaking it as a kingdom of heaven. The arrival of the Messiah is good news indeed!

Can you imagine how the cleansed leper is feeling? He wants to go straight home to hug the family and friends he hasn't been able to touch. Jesus gives him another task:

Mark 1:40-45 (NIV)

⁴³ Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning:

⁴⁴ “See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.”

⁴⁵ Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news.

As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

Remember, Jesus is operating under the Sinai covenant. The new covenant established by the cross is yet to come (Mark 14:24). The Torah provided for a priest to examine someone who had been diagnosed as a leper and declare them *clean* if the disease had gone (Leviticus 14:1-32). So, Jesus insists the man follow the Law and receive his declaration of cleanness from the priest.

This makes pragmatic sense. His family and friends would be terrified if the guy rushed up to hug them without a certificate from the priest. But Jesus has a more important reason: *as a testimony to them [the priests]* (verse 44).

There were two anointed roles in Old Testament times: priesthood and kingship. Priests were anointed to represent God's sovereign authority over his nation, serving the one who sat enthroned between the cherubim in the temple. Kings were anointed to represent on earth the reign of One who reigns in the heavens. The two anointed roles were intended to represent God's authority cooperatively, though there was often conflict between them.

For 500 years, there had been no kingship. The temple had been rebuilt with priests anointed again in 515 BC. But no king had been anointed because the nation was ruled by foreign powers: Persia, Greece, the Ptolomies and Seleucids, and Rome. The prophet Zechariah sees the two anointed roles as the oil of olive trees feeding the light

of the divine presence in his people (Zechariah 4:2).¹³ One of these (the high priest Joshua) had been cleansed and restored to function as God's representative in his house (Zechariah 3), but the other one has not been restored. Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David, but under Persia he was only governor of Judah, not king (Haggai 1:1). Zerubbabel was told to wait for God to restore the kingship, not to fight for it: "*This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty*" Zechariah 4:6).

In the meantime, the high priest Joshua would have to carry both roles. While they're still expecting God to restore *the Branch* from David's fallen dynasty (Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15), Joshua the high priest receives that name and a crown (Zechariah 6:11-12)¹⁴ until the day when Jerusalem sees the king riding into Jerusalem: *See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey* (Zechariah 9:9).¹⁵

But when that day came, the priesthood had held the crown for so long it was not about to recognize the king God sent them. Seeing the king as a threat to the temple's authority, the high priest would lead the charge to have the anointed king put to death (Mark 14:55-64).¹⁶

That's why, from the very first chapter, King Jesus is reaching out to the temple, wanting them to hear *the testimony* that God's anointed was among them. He is setting God's people free from impure spirits. He is cleansing the unclean, and he recognizes the authority of the priests with their God-given role of *offering the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing* (Mark 1:44). Jesus wants the temple leaders to know, "*The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near*" (1:14-15).

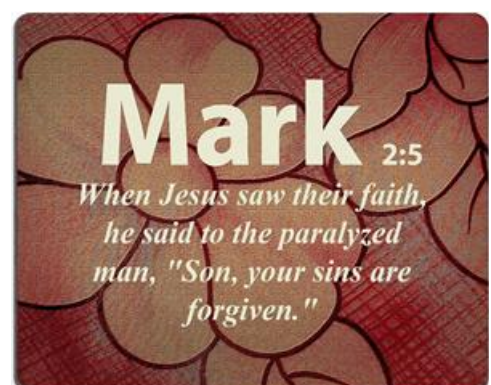
2.6 Why does Jesus forgive sins if only God can do that? (2:1-12)

Now Jesus forgives sins. Is a human being allowed to do that? Or is that something only God can do? What does this story reveal about Jesus?

Mark 2:1-5 (NIV)

¹ A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.

² They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. ³ Some men came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because



¹³ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2021/04/26/rulers-of-the-restored-kingdom/>

¹⁴ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2021/04/30/who-wears-the-crown/>

¹⁵ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2021/05/19/the-king-is-coming/>

¹⁶ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2022/03/16/two-powers/>

of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on.⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralysed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Capernaum is the place Jesus calls “home” during his ministry (verse 1). Just as when he left to speak in other villages, the people of Capernaum are still asking Jesus to deal with their afflictions. The stretcher-bearers have no way to get their friend anywhere near Jesus, so they climb on top of the house and cut a hole in the flat adobe-style roof above where Jesus is. They believe Jesus can help their friend, but Jesus’s response is unusual: he forgives the paralysed man’s sins.

For the Bible scholars in the crowd, Jesus is claiming power he does not have:

Mark 2:6-12 (NIV)

⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves,⁷ “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Their argument goes like this:

- a) Sin is a debt against God.
- b) Only the one owed can forgive the debt.
- c) Therefore, only God can forgive sins.

It follows that Jesus is blaspheming—claiming to speak for God when he has no right to do so. The Torah is clear about what should be done to anyone who falsely claims to speak for God: “*But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded ... is to be put to death*” (Deuteronomy 18:20).

What do you make of their argument? Are (a) and (b) both true? Does (c) follow? Many Bible scholars today accept (a), (b), and (c), but draw a different conclusion: if Jesus is forgiving sins, he must **be God**.

But neither Mark nor Jesus is making a fourth century claim about the trinity here. Listen carefully to Jesus’ explanation of his authority:

Mark 2:8-10 (NIV)

⁸ Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things?⁹ Which is easier: to say to this paralysed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’?¹⁰ But I want you to know that **the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.**”

The son of man? What’s that? That is Jesus’ favourite way of referring to himself (81 times in the Gospels). In Jesus’ language (Aramaic), *a son of man* simply meant a human being, a descendant of humanity. Every person in this room is a son of man.

Yet, to be human is to be the bearer of a special calling, a very significant authority. Humans represent God over creation. Psalm 8 celebrates God’s reign through us:

Psalm 8:3-6 (ESV)

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

⁴ what is **man** that you are mindful of him,
and the **son of man** that you care for him?

⁵ Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honour.

⁶ You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet ...

The phrase *son of man* is parallel to *man* in verse 4. Verse 3 refers to the lights God set in the heavens as signs that earth is governed by heaven (Genesis 1:14-16). Verses 5-8 refer to the dominion God gave humans to represent God's reign on earth.

Verse 5 literally says God made us *one step lower than God* (*Ēlō-hîm*) in relation to creation. We're the most honoured creatures in all creation. Despite that, we tried to become gods in our own right (Genesis 3:5), killing each other like animals as we try to take God's power into human hands (Genesis 10:9-12; 11:4). As Daniel saw how beastly human rulers had become, he heard God promise that one day our ancient heavenly ruler would take the kingdoms from the beasts and give authority to *one like a son of man* (Daniel 7:13-14).

That's why Jesus saw himself as *the human descendant* (son of man) who would inherit the authority God gave to humans over creation in the beginning. And he does this not by killing his enemies, but by being killed by his enemies and raised up as Lord of all. That was Jesus' understanding of his identity and his mission. He had the authority to release the world from its enslavement to evil, to sin and death.

That's what Jesus was declaring when said, "*But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*" (Mark 1:10). After using his authority to release many people from specific sicknesses and afflictions, Jesus announces that he is the human descendant who receives the authority God intended us to have in the beginning. He's using his authority to release the world from enslavement to sin and death and every form of evil that cripples our humanity.

The scribes did not understand delegated authority. As Caesar's representative in Jerusalem, Pilate had authority to forgive a murderer like Barabbas (Mark 15:7-15). And just as Rome's officials operated with Rome's authority, Jesus operated as *a man under authority* (Luke 7:8-9).

Releasing this man from his disability therefore became a sign of the greater release Jesus was providing for us all:

Mark 2:10-12 (NIV)

So he said to the man, ¹¹ "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."

¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This

amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Crucially, Jesus did not say this individual's disability was the direct result of personal sins he had committed (compare John 9:3). The point is that Jesus is performing a release for God's people that is much bigger than individual sins.

The kingdom established by the Sinai covenant had been lost as they went into exile because of their sins (unwillingness to live under the Lord's leadership). Yet the Law promised that, even if they had gone into exile, God would restore them:

Deuteronomy 30:2-10 (NIV)

² When you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, ³ then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. ⁴ Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. ... ⁹ The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your ancestors, ¹⁰ if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

For 600 years, this promise had not been fulfilled. The Pharisees concluded that the people had not yet been obedient enough, so they made it their business to point out where the people were still failing God, preventing everyone from experiencing restoration. The last thing they wanted was for someone to go around forgiving sins like this as if the sins didn't matter. In their view, Jesus was making things worse: he should be pointing out people's sins, not telling people they were forgiven.

This is a fundamental conflict between how the teachers of the Law understood God's authority versus the authority the heavenly sovereign had given to his anointed king now that the time had come for the kingdom of God to be restored (Mark 1:15). Jesus was using his authority at the individual level, releasing this bed-ridden man who could not get up unless God raised him up. If his sins were forgiven, he was free to rise from the captivity of his bed and resume the life he had lost. This was a sign of what Jesus had been called to do for the whole people of God: to release them from the captivity of their paralysed life under foreign rulers, restoring them as a nation under divine kingship in the Christ the anointed king.

The point is not that Jesus must be God in order to forgive sins. The point is that the fallen dominion God gave humans over the earth in the beginning is being restored to the earth in the God-appointed heir of humanity who has been given the authority to forgive our sins so heaven's reign is restored to earth. “*I want you to know that **the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,***” Jesus said (1:10).

2.7 Conclusion

All our questions tonight were about the authority of the Christ:

1. How does Jesus' authority relate to us? (1:16-20)
2. What authority does a king have in the kingdom? (1:21-28)
3. How does King Jesus care for his subjects? (1:29-34)
4. Why didn't Jesus capitalize on his popularity? (1:35-39)
5. Why does Jesus touch uncleanness? (1:40-45)
6. Why does Jesus forgive sins if only God can do that? (2:1-12)

What are your thoughts?

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For next time, **read the rest of Mark chapters 2 and 3** (Mark 2:13-3:35).

3 The authority of the Christ (Mark 2:13–3:35)

In what ways are we like Jesus, and in what ways do we need to change?

Learning from Jesus transforms us to be like him (Luke 6:40).

Mark keeps focusing on Jesus' *authority*, the anointed Son who restores heaven's reign to the earth:

- The Spirit-anointed ruler (Christ/Messiah) cleanses the world, pleasing his Father and overturns the reign of evil (Mark 1:1-13).
- Since God's anointed king was here, the time had come for the kingdom to be restored (1:15).
- He has authority to instruct his people (1:22), and authority to drive out evil powers (1:27).
- As their king, he takes responsibility for the sufferings of his people (1:34). He cleanses and restores the people who were cut off (1:42).
- The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, that is, to restore his fallen people (2:10-11).

What do you make of Mark's focus on Jesus' authority? Anything for us to learn here? Do you have questions on what we've covered so far before we continue?

3.1 Did Jesus call people "sinners"? (2:13-17)

Like John the Baptist, Jesus believed his arrival meant *the forgiveness of sins* (Mark 1:4-5; 2:5-10). Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus did not use the word *sinners* for people whom they viewed as unacceptable.

Mark 2:13-17 (NIV)

¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and **sinners** were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the **sinners** and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and **sinners**?"

¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but **sinners**."

Whenever Israel paid tribute to other powers, it meant they were not free to be the nation under God's reign (e.g. 2 Kings 17:3; 23:33; Ezra 4:18-22; Esther 10:1; Daniel 11:20; Mark 12:14). That's why *tax collectors* were regarded as traitors, helping to

finance the oppression of God's people. The Pharisees named and shamed people like Levi as *sinner*s—people who should be rejected from God's people so the kingdom could be restored.

Here's an example of how the Pharisees prayed. This was written by Pharisees in the century before Christ. (It's not written by Solomon, not part of the Bible):

Psalms of Solomon 17:25-29

²⁵ Cleanse Jerusalem from the nations that trample it in destruction,
to expel **sinner**s from the inheritance in wisdom, in righteousness,
to rub out the arrogance of the **sinner** like a potter's vessel,
to crush all their support with an iron rod;

²⁷ to destroy lawless nations by the word of his mouth,
for gentiles to flee from his face at his threat,
and to reprove **sinner**s by the word of their heart.

²⁸ And he will gather a holy people whom he will lead in righteousness,
and he will judge tribes of the people sanctified by the Lord its God.

²⁹ And he will no longer permit injustice to dwell among them,
and no person who sees wickedness will dwell with them.¹⁷

Pharisees said people like Matthew (tax collectors and sinners) should be ostracised, so people like themselves (the righteous) can have the kingdom.

Jesus offends the Pharisees by sitting and eating with the “sinners,” treating them as people of his kingdom. **Jesus rejects the Pharisees' categories.** The “sinners” are crowding around Jesus, while the “righteous” reject his leadership. Jesus therefore turns away from the “righteous” (i.e. he does not call the Pharisees); instead he calls the “sinners” (i.e. those they judge as unacceptable) (verse 17).¹⁸

Unfortunately, in the last 2000 years, Christians have been quick to use the “sinner” label to get people to do what we want. We behave more like the Pharisees than like Jesus. When Jesus uses the word “sinner” he's usually responding to the Pharisees' label (stated or implied).¹⁹ The only exception is when Jesus applies the label to a group the Pharisees would never have called “sinners”: the Jerusalem temple leaders who were plotting his assassination (Mark 14:41).



Does the way you use the word *sinner* reflect Jesus or the Pharisees?

¹⁷ David A. deSilva, *The Lexham Old Testament Apocrypha: A New Translation* (Lexham Academic, 2023).

¹⁸ Don't swap the Pharisees' categories for later Christian ones. We understand that “no one is righteous” and “all have sinned (Romans 3:10, 23), so righteous = 0% and sinners = 100%. But Jesus was not saying, “I have not come to call nobody but to call everybody.” In the framework of the Old Testament covenant, there were righteous people, e.g. Noah (Genesis 6:9; 7:1).

¹⁹ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2017/08/25/when-did-jesus-label-people-sinners/>

3.2 Should we fast? (2:18-22)

Fasting is often labelled a spiritual discipline. We fast for personal growth, wise decision making, or asking God's help with our needs. But in the first century, fasting was usually communal. The Pharisees assigned days each week when the community should fast, asking God to restore his people as a nation again.

Jesus and his followers were not participating in the assigned fasts:



Mark 2:18 (NIV)

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

John's disciples were fasting for the restoration of God's reign over his people. That was John's main message: the arrival of the kingdom in Jesus the Messiah and the transforming work of the Spirit (Mark 1:1-8). That was Jesus' main message too. So why weren't Jesus and his disciples fasting and seeking God for the kingdom?

Mark 2:19-20 (NIV)

¹⁹ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them.

²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast."

The Torah never commanded fasting, only feasting. Three times a year, the people were called to celebrate their heavenly sovereign at the place where he lived among them (Deuteronomy 16).

When the temple fell and the people went into exile, they fasted because they could not celebrate the feasts. They *turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting* for the kingdom to be restored (Daniel 9:3ff).

After 70 years in exile, the temple was rebuilt and the festivals resumed, but they did not yet have God reigning over them through his anointed (a son of David). Should they keep fasting? They asked Zechariah. He said God was looking not so much for sad faces (mourning and fasting) as for a people who would align their hearts with God's character: "*Administer true justice, show mercy and have compassion on one another*" (Zechariah 7:1-9). Isaiah 58 gives a similar answer.

When the wedding day arrives, it's a day of celebration. In the same way, the arrival of the Messiah is a time to celebrate: "*The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near*" (1:15). After all these years, the king had arrived. The fasting and mourn-

ing were over. That's why Jesus and his followers were not joining in the Pharisees' fasts: this was the day of good news!

But Jesus knew his coronation day was still to come. Before the anointed king is enthroned over his people, he will be *taken from them* (verse 20). He will be betrayed by his own followers and the leaders of his people. The King of the Jews will be executed as he takes into his own body the demise of the kingdom on behalf of his people. That will be a day for mourning and grief and fasting (verse 20).

God was not simply retrofitting the kingship to the fallen kingdom:

Mark 2:21-22 (NIV)

²¹ “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse.

²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

When a garment becomes so threadbare that it tears, you can't just patch it with new cloth, for that would make the old garment tear even further. God was not simply stitching the Messiah onto the fallen kingdom established with the Sinai Covenant. The restoration of divine kingship will be a new covenant, not just a patch on the old.

Only fresh skins can hold fresh wine. The dried-out skins from previous years can't cope with freshly fermenting wine. In the same way, the rigid structures of the Torah covenant cannot adapt to the restoration God was bringing to his people in Christ. As Jeremiah said, this is *a new covenant*, more expansive and transformative than the Sinai one (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The old cloth is torn. The old wineskins cannot adapt to the new covenant. The blood of the Messiah forms a new covenant that extends God's reign to all the earth. We value what God did through his people in the old covenant, but its feasts, fasts, rituals, laws, and customs do not simply transfer to the new covenant in Christ.

3.3 Should we keep the Sabbath? (2:23–28)

The Sabbath was a major area of confrontation between Jesus and Jewish leaders. Observing the Sabbath was not optional like fasting. It was a foundational command of the Sinai covenant (Exodus 20:8-11).

Mark 2:23-24 (NIV)

²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.

²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

At issue is whether Jesus was breaking the Law and leading his followers astray. Some thirty years later as Mark recorded these events, the question was still crucial for Mark's audience. **Should followers of Jesus keep the Sabbath?**

Jesus was born and lived his life as a Torah-obedient Jew, living *under the Law* (Galatians 4:4). In Jesus' mind, nibbling seeds from the fields as they passed through was not "working." Exactly what does constitute "work" on the Sabbath was (and still is) hotly debated among the rabbis. Jesus does not join that argument. He broadens the topic to Torah observance in general:



Stopping for Shabbat. <https://jeffseidel.com/getshabbat/what-is-shabbat/>

Mark 2:25-26 (NIV)

²⁵ He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

These events are from 1 Samuel 21. God had sacked Saul as king, anointing David instead (1 Samuel 16:13-14). Saul refused to step down, and set out to kill David. Running for his life and needing food, David approached the priest at the tabernacle.²⁰ The priest had nothing but the holy bread. By eating the bread consecrated to the LORD, David broke the Law but saved his life.

Here's the fundamental difference in values between Jesus and the Pharisees. To the Pharisees, the Laws were inviolable; human life must comply with the Laws. To Jesus, God values human life, and gave the Laws to support human life. David was right to treat his life as more valuable than compliance with the Law.

Jesus then takes that principle and applies it to the law about the Sabbath:

Mark 2:27-28 (NIV)

²⁷ Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

God did not make humans so there'd be someone to worship him on the Sabbath. God is not narcissistic. In fact, the Torah commands about the Sabbath say nothing

²⁰ 1 Samuel 21 says the priest's name Ahimelek. His son Abiathar escaped Saul's massacre of the high priestly family (1 Samuel 22:20). William L Lane suggests, "Mark may have inserted the reference to Abiathar to indicate the section of the Samuel scroll in which the incident could be located." *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1974), 116.

about worship; they're about stopping work. The Sabbath was given as a blessing, to benefit people.

Under Pharaoh the people did not have a day off each week. When they asked for a moment to stop and honour the LORD, Pharaoh accused them of being lazy and made their work even harder (Exodus 5). The LORD is nothing like the tyrants who run this world. God gave us a blessed, fruitful creation where we do not need to work seven days a week. When God rested in Genesis 2:3, he was giving creation not a command to obey but a blessing to enjoy.

By contrast, the Sabbath command in the Sinai Law did restrict what Israel could do. The Sabbath law recalled the creational rest (Exodus 20:11) even though the world was no longer at rest (Genesis 5:29). The Sabbath law recalled Israel's experience as slaves needing rescue (Deuteronomy 5:15).

But the Sinai covenant with Israel did not deliver the creational rest that the Sabbath proclaimed. The hope of a-world-at-rest is only realized through the new covenant God made with all the peoples of the earth, as we give allegiance to his Christ. (Hebrews 4.)

Jesus' followers are not required to keep the Sinai Law (Acts 15). We are not judged on whether we observe the Sinai covenant's special days (annual festivals, monthly celebrations, and weekly Sabbaths) since *these are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however is found in Christ* (Colossians 2:16-17).

And that's exactly what Mark is saying in verse 28. As we saw (page 23), the son of man is the human descendant who finally inherits the dominion God gave humans at creation, including the blessing of *rest*. He is therefore *Lord of the Sabbath*, the ruler who ends the tyranny of the beasts and receives the kingdom (Daniel 7), the Son who receives the nations as his inheritance and ends the wars (Psalm 2:8), seated at God's right hand until his enemies are part of his footstool (Psalm 110:1), the one who hands the kingdom back to God his Father after bringing an end to every competing dominion and authority and power, for he must reign until all his enemies are under his feet so creation is at rest as God intended in the beginning (1 Corinthians 15:24ff). This is the Son of Man who is Lord of the Sabbath-rest God always intended for creation.

He achieves all this through the new covenant established with his bloodshed (the cross). He is not subject to the Sinai covenant laws (such as the requirements to stop work on the Sabbath), so neither are his people. As Lord of the Sabbath, he will restore rest to creation. All of us find our salvation, our rescue, our rest in him.

The Sabbath is not a law for Christians as it was for Israel under the Sinai covenant. For us, the Sabbath is the promise of God restoring peace to creation so it ends up being all God intended in the beginning.

3.4 To kill or to heal? What does God do? (Mark 3:1-6)

Ignore the chapter break. Mark continues the theme of Jesus' authority on the Sabbath:

Mark 3:1-6 (NIV)

¹ Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. ² Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

⁴ Then Jesus asked them, "**Which is lawful on the Sabbath:** to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

⁵ He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Verse 4 is the heart of it. What does God want from his people? To do good, or to do evil? To save lives, and overturn deformity? Or to take lives and maim people?

An experience in the second century BC had changed their answer to Jesus' question. Antiochus Epiphanies IV pressured the Jews to give up their uniqueness and behave like Greeks, so he took advantage of their unwillingness to fight on the Sabbath. This account is from a deuterocanonical book (the additional books in the Catholic Bible):

1 Maccabees 2:38-41 (ESV-CE)

³⁸ So they attacked them on the Sabbath, and they died, with their wives and children and cattle, to the number of 1,000 persons.

³⁹ When Mattathias and his friends learned of it, they mourned for them deeply. ⁴⁰ And each said to his neighbour: "If we all do as our brothers have done and refuse to fight with the Gentiles for our lives and our ordinances, they will quickly destroy us from the earth." ⁴¹ So they made this decision that day: "Let us fight against every man who comes to attack us on the Sabbath day; let us not all die as our brothers died in their hiding places."

According to Josephus (a Jew who supplied the Romans with a history of Israel), this change became policy: *This speech persuaded them; and this rule continues among us to this day, that if there be a necessity, we may fight on Sabbath days.*²¹

²¹ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, "Antiquities 12.277" in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 325.

Mark is highlighting a key difference between Jesus and his contemporaries. According to their values, it is lawful on the Sabbath to fight, kill, and maim their enemies in self-defence, but it is not lawful on the Sabbath for Jesus to make someone whole. And once they've sided with death, they can use that against Jesus (verse 6).

Pharisees and Herodians had very different values. The Pharisees want Jesus killed as a Law-breaker. The Herodians (supporters of Herod) want Jesus killed because an anointed king posed a threat to Herod's reign. This is the first clue in Mark's Gospel of how the story might end.

Some Christians freak out when Mark says Jesus was *angry* (verse 5). If I'm reading the text as all about me, the idea of Jesus being angry with me is terrifying. But the text is not all about me. Anger is a God-given emotion. We feel anger when we see his children being harmed just as God does. Jesus was angry at their murderous thoughts, the twisted belief that God wanted them to kill their enemies—a category that includes Jesus himself! Unmanaged anger can cause us to do evil to others, but Jesus expresses his anger not by doing harm but by boldly doing good in the face of such danger: “Stretch out your hand!” I'm so glad that takes the power from these killers and ultimately gives it to the one who sets all things right.

Jesus was *angry* and *distressed* (verse 5) because the nation called to be a light to the nations so misrepresented God's character. Their stubborn hearts were so convinced that what they wanted was right that if God didn't make it happen, they would! Enforcing our own justice on the world is always pride, never God's justice. They'll find that out when they kill Jesus and God raises him up to save the world.

3.5 The extent of Jesus' authority (Mark 3:7-12)

Since colluding groups were trying to kill Jesus (3:6), he withdrew from Galilee. That doesn't diminish his popularity; it makes him better known in other parts:

Mark 3:7-8 (NIV)

⁷ Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from **Galilee** followed. ⁸ When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from **Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon.**

Put those regions together and you have the full extent of Israel and Judah—the divided kingdom of Old Testament times. Israel included the whole region around Galilee as well as the trans-Jordan regions (east of the Jordan River), while Judah covered Judea and Idumea (with Jerusalem as capital). Tyre and Sidon were on the Phoenician coast north of Israel.



“The Division of Herod’s Kingdom” in Carl G. Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, (Zondervan, 2010), 206

Mark is telling us how far the good news of the Messiah spread. Jesus’ authority extended to the whole land:

Mark 3:9-12 (NIV)

⁹ Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. ¹⁰ For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. ¹¹ Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and

cried out, “You are the Son of God.”¹² But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him.

Not until Mark 8:29 do people begin to recognize the authority God has given to Jesus as his anointed ruler. But already, the evil powers recognize him. These spiritual forces have been blocking the kingdom of God from functioning on earth, so they're terrified of the authority Jesus is exercising as he sets people free from afflictions and releases them from demonic control. Jesus does not want their testimony.

3.6 Why twelve male apostles? (Mark 3:13-19)

By appointing twelve ambassadors for the kingdom of God, Jesus is beginning to restore heaven's government to the nation that has been oppressed for 600 years:

Mark 3:13-19 (NIV)

¹³ Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴ He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and to have authority to drive out demons.

¹⁶ These are the twelve he appointed:

Simon (to whom he gave the name **Peter**),

¹⁷ **James** son of Zebedee and his brother **John** (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”),

¹⁸ **Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James** son of Alphaeus, **Thaddaeus, Simon** the Zealot

¹⁹ and **Judas Iscariot**, who betrayed him.



Why twelve? And why all males?

Jacob's twelve sons effectively became the twelve tribes of Israel. They tried living under God's leadership through tribal leaders (Judges), but eventually asked for a king to lead them and repel their enemies. After Solomon's death, the kingdom split. Eventually the kingdoms of Israel and Judah both fell. The prophets promised the restoration of the LORD'S reign over the tribes of Israel and Judah (e.g. Zechariah 9:1; 10:6), the restoration of *all Israel* (a phrase occurring 47 times in 1–2 Chronicles, e.g. 2 Chronicles 30:1, 5, 6).

The Messiah's immediate responsibility was to lead his own people. With no one to lead them, they had spread all over the Mediterranean world: *harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd* (Matthew 9:36). Jesus chose **twelve** as a symbol of restoring the twelve tribes of Israel. Initially, he sent them only to *the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Matthew 10:6).

This initial restoration work was part of the Old Covenant. That covenant was thoroughly patriarchal from the start. There is no way Jesus could have appointed women for work, to represent the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Later, when Jesus dies as King of the Jews and is raised up as Lord of heaven and earth, establishing a new covenant in his blood, the restrictions of the Old Covenant no longer apply. The new covenant unites us as one people in the Messiah. Ethnic divisions (Jew/gentile) no longer apply. Patriarchal gender divisions (male/female) no longer apply. Social status divisions of human society (slave/free) no longer apply. The whole creation is being restored in the resurrected Messiah, so *there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Messiah Jesus* (Galatians 3:28).

That's why the day that founded the new covenant (resurrection day), Jesus sends women as the first gospel messengers (John 20:1-17). The old divisions no longer apply.

In summary, Jesus chose twelve males to symbolize the restoration of Israel's fallen tribes. Now he leads all the peoples of the earth, regardless of gender, ethnicity or social status, commissioning us all with the good news that he is Lord of all.²²

3.7 Why did his family try to stop Jesus? (Mark 3:20-35)

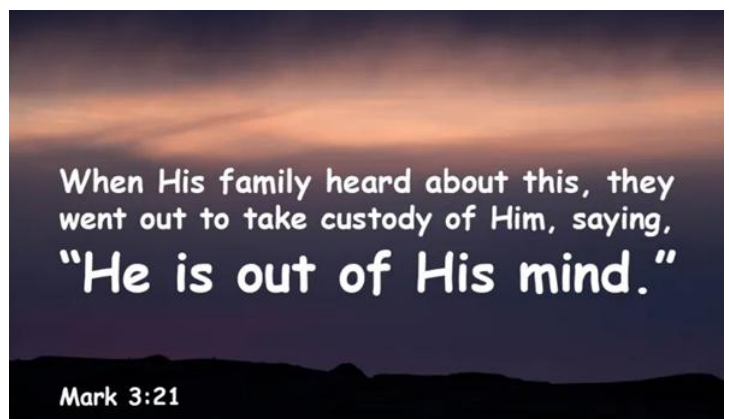
One of the saddest moments in Mark's Gospel is when Jesus' own family tries to terminate his ministry:

Mark 3:20-21 (NIV)

²⁰ Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. ²¹ When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

Jesus' family arrived *to take charge of him* (NIV). The word implies the use of force: *to seize him* (ESV), *to take custody of him* (NASB), *to restrain him* (NRSV).

The family's attempt to stop Jesus has the backing of the highest level of Jewish society. Bible scholars from the temple in Jerusalem travelled to Galilee to ensure Jesus was sent home with his family:



²² For more detail, see <https://allenbrowne.blog/2017/09/25/why-did-jesus-appoint-12-apostles/> and <https://allenbrowne.blog/2017/09/27/why-no-women-among-jesus-apostles/>

Mark 3:22 (NIV)

²² And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.”

The meaning of *Beelzebul* is unclear, but the parallel phrase (*prince of demons*) makes it clear the Bible scholars are talking about Satan. They say that Jesus' authority to order the demons around comes directly from the top—from the prince of demons. According to these scholars, Jesus is not God's anointed Messiah sent to restore the kingdom of God; he's a tool of the devil to keep the house of Israel enslaved.

Mark 3:22-30 (NIV)

²³ So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: “How can Satan drive out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. ²⁷ In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.”

³⁰ He said this because they were saying, “He has an impure spirit.”

Jesus says the Enemy would be fighting against itself if it was driving demons out of the people of God. So many kingdoms throughout history have been destroyed by internal fighting (verse 26).

What is the **unforgivable sin**? What is *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit* (verse 29)? Why raise this topic in this context?

The Jerusalem scholars just accused Jesus of being a Satanic agent. Speak against Herod and he'd imprison or decapitate you (1:14; 6:27). Slander Pilate and he'd run you through with a sword.

But Jesus is a very different kind of king. Despite their treason against his leadership, Jesus offers them a pardon: *people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter* (verse 28).

They can say what they like about him and be forgiven (astounding!). However, Jesus warns that God cannot rescue them if they keep resisting his Holy Spirit God. It's the cleansing Spirit of God who regenerates us as we place our trust in Messiah Jesus, but where the Holy Spirit finds no faith in Christ there is no forgiveness. The good news is that the King is giving them time to turn and trust the good news.

Now Mark returns us to the story of the family that had come to take Jesus away:

Mark 3:31-35 (NIV)

³¹ Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

³³ "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. ³⁴ Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

What's the common ground between the family that wants to forcibly take Jesus home and the Jerusalem scholars who portray Jesus as an enemy agent? It's not hard to imagine how they may have colluded.

In Jewish culture the oldest son has responsibility to look after the family and take care for his mother if the father is no longer around. Instead, Jesus is off with his mates travelling around Galilee. He has left his brothers and sisters to fulfil what they regard as his responsibility. If they feel disaffected, it wouldn't take much prompting from the Jerusalem scholars to convince them that they would be doing the right thing by taking their older brother home and forcing him to look after the family. They even bring Mary as Exhibit A: the widow the oldest son is failing to care for.

The plan is to turn up unannounced and interrupt Jesus while he speaks. He'll come out to find out what the problem is, maybe Mary's health or the death of a relative. If he doesn't respond to them, everyone will see Jesus failing to care for his family.

Jesus does not come out to attend to his family. Instead, he reframes what *family* means. Jesus is not rejecting his mother or his brothers (compare John 19:26; 1 Corinthians 15:7). What he is doing is redefining family to include everyone who belongs to his Father in the heavens. His brothers and sisters have not understood the extent of the family responsibility entrusted to Jesus. The son of man (descendant of humanity) has authority to care for the whole human family.

3.8 Conclusion

In his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, Jesus was straddling two covenants.

- He was God's Messiah for the Jewish nation, the kingdom founded at Sinai that had fallen and was waiting for God to restore.
- At the same time, he was laying the foundation for the new covenant established in his blood, the covenant that restores the whole earth as a kingdom of heaven.

So, we don't just import elements from the Sinai covenant into the new covenant: our treatment of sinners, fasting, the Sabbath, and the twelve male apostles, for example.

How are you doing when it comes to recognizing how Jesus's ministry addresses both covenants, that elements of the old cannot simply be patched onto the new?

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Mark's main theme seems to be Jesus' *authority*. Is that a big deal for you? How important is it for us to call people today to recognize the authority of the Christ?

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What else strikes you from these chapters?

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In preparation for next week, **read Mark 4–5.**

4 What God's kingdom is like (Mark 4–5)

We've seen Jesus using his authority to set people free from afflictions and the powers of evil. The self-appointed guards of society (scribes and Pharisees) condemned Jesus for accepting "sinners," ignoring their fasts, and not stopping his healing programme even on rest day. When they turned his family against him, Jesus redefined "family" as the entire community God had placed in his care.

Tonight we see Jesus planting images of the kingdom of God in his audience through stories. The kingdoms of this world have been built by uprooting other powers (war), but God's kingdom grows organically. Like a farmer, Jesus plants the seeds that will eventually grow into the harvest God always intended. Even the worst spiritual oppression cannot stop it, as we'll see in our second session.

Any questions before we begin Mark 4 and 5?

4.1 Who was the sower? (4:1-20)

Heard the parable of the sower? What's it about? The farmland (four soils)? The farmer? The seed? The way the farmer plants his seed? Fruitfulness? Evangelism?

How do you understand this parable?

Mark 4:1-9 (NIV)

¹ Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said:

³ "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil.

It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

⁹ Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

The crowds didn't understand Jesus' story. The disciples didn't understand the story. Why tell stories no one understands?



Mark 4:10-12 (NIV)

¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹² so that,

“ ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’” [Isaiah 6:9-10]

At first glance, the quotation from Isaiah may sound like Jesus doesn't want people to understand the story, as if Jesus doesn't want his nation to turn to him to be released from their sins and restored as a kingdom under God. That would contradict everything Jesus has been saying from the start (1:15). The context in Isaiah clarifies what Jesus is referring to.

In Isaiah 6, Israel's heavenly sovereign is calling Isaiah to prophetic ministry. The LORD of hosts calls for a messenger, and Isaiah volunteers. He warns Isaiah this will be a frustrating commission, since God's nation doesn't want to listen to the heavenly sovereign. Their ears, eyes, and hearts are unresponsive. Isaiah asks how long he must keep confronting a people who won't listen. God's reply was effectively:

“Until everything has fallen. Until there's nothing left.”

Isaiah was not alone. All the prophets knew the frustration of a people who would not listen to their heavenly sovereign. Some, like Elijah, gave up (1 Kings 19).

Jesus faced this frustration. What's the point of teaching God's people how to live as the restored kingdom if they will reject God's leadership and kill God's anointed?

That's why Jesus gave cameos of what the kingdom would be like, parables that contain the seeds of the kingdom that is yet to grow. Jesus is the farmer broadcasting these seeds. He knows many of them won't produce anything. Some of what he's sharing never even germinates. Some germinates but doesn't grow. Some germinates and grows but never becomes fruitful.

Ask yourself:

- a) **Who is the sower?** It's the person telling these stories.
- b) **What message is he sowing?** Hint: verse 11. Compare 1:15; 4:26, 30.
- c) **Is it worth it when the majority were unresponsive?** Hint: verse 8.
God decreed fruitfulness for the earth in the beginning, and God will have his harvest in the end (compare Isaiah 55:10-13).

Here is Jesus' explanation of why he persisted in his frustrating commission by using parables:

Mark 4:13-20 (NIV)

¹³ Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴ The farmer sows the word.

¹⁵ Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

Do you understand this parable?

4.2 Who are the kingdom parables about? (4:21-34)

Don’t you love the stories Jesus uses to explain what it’s like to be God’s kingdom?

Mark 4:21-23 (NIV)

²¹ He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? ²² For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. ²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”

When the light comes on, we can see what was there all along. In God’s kingdom, nothing stays hidden, even if it’s not clear yet. What was it that people were not yet seeing as Jesus spoke these words? (Hint: Mark 8:27-29).

Again, Jesus is not proclaiming his own authority as anointed king. That’s something God must reveal to those who are open to hear it (the opposite of verse 12).

Mark 4:24-25 (NIV)

²⁴ “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued.

“With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.

²⁵ Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

What was Jesus asking his audience to *consider carefully*? Some had already made judgements about Jesus (Mark 3:6, 20, 22, 30), and how we judge Jesus is how God judges us (compare Matthew 10:32-33). If we have an openness to Jesus, we’ll have everything else we need, but if we’re closed to Jesus, we lose everything.

How does Jesus envision the kingdom of God growing?

Mark 4:26-29 (NIV)

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

It is God who grows his kingdom. Human effort cannot make it happen. That makes the kingdom of God unique, different to every other kingdom in history.

Kingdoms do not spring up organically. It takes enormous resources, effort, and strategic planning to build a kingdom. Jesus' audience knew this well from their experience as a nation.

The word *kingdom* first appears in Genesis 10:10-12. In the prequel to the Abrahamic nation, the chapter explains why there are gentile nations. Babylon and Assyria—the kingdoms that eventually overpowered Judah and Israel—are named here. A warrior named Nimrod realized the power of death (authorized in 9:1-6) could be used to “hunt” humans. So it's warriors who build kingdoms like Assyria and Babylon: through war!

That's how kingdoms grow. That's how David extended his power over his enemies (1–2 Samuel). Yet, this son of David tells a different story.

In Jesus' parables, the kingdom grows organically. The heavenly sovereign decreed fruitfulness for the earth (Genesis 1:11-12) as God gave dominion to the human, so this is how the kingdom grows for the Son of Man.

Under Jesus' leadership, we are also servants of the heavenly sovereign, humans in partnership with God, beneficiaries of what God has intended from the start. We scatter the fruitful seed, relying on God to make it grow into the harvest that comes to life in the resurrected king rather than through war.

The organic growth metaphor continues in Jesus' next parable:

Mark 4:30-32 (NIV)

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

If you were buying seeds at the market and a seed slipped off the scales, you'd ignore it. What's one little seed?

Yet, in the way God designed the world, one little mustard seed is not insignificant. It can grow into a shrub that takes up a whole corner of your garden. It will be significant not only for you, but also for other creatures in creation.

What do you think Jesus was talking about? Who was the insignificant seed who would grow into something significant? And why is this a story of God's kingdom?

As a side note, please don't push Jesus' stories to say things he wasn't saying. Biologically speaking, the mustard seed is not *the smallest of all seeds on earth* (verse 31), and the mustard bush is not *the largest of all garden plants* (verse 32). Jesus was not giving a lecture in biology; he was speaking of how the kingdom grows.

In all these stories of the kingdom, the crucial question is, "Who is the king?" The stories make sense when you realize Jesus is explaining his actions without making power claims. It is God who reveals his anointed to the peoples of the earth.

Mark 4:33-34 (NIV)

³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Is there something for us to learn from Jesus' story-telling approach? Would you prefer it if Jesus had provided a more systematic approach to what we believe, a theology of God, humanity, salvation, church, and end times?

That might be attractive to some people (modern Western academics?), but stories work for everyone in every culture and in every century. All of us use stories to make sense of the world we're living in. So, was Jesus on to something here? Should we focus more on storytelling?

If you've tried telling stories, one of the problems we face is this: to what extent do we explain our stories? Fairytales and movies designed for children sometimes spell out the moral of the story, but that's not how you write a good movie script or spy novel. The meaning is transmitted through the story, not overtly spelled out. Jesus was okay with telling the stories and leaving his audience to figure it out in a way that most preachers don't. Is there something to learn from Jesus' approach?

4.3 When creation is out of control (4:35-41)

Most of the time, Lake Galilee is relatively calm, but storms could threaten to swamp the small fishing boats used in the first century:

Mark 4:35-41 (NIV)

³⁵ That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” ³⁶

Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. ³⁷ A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. ³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

³⁹ He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”



Model of a first-century fishing boat, found in Lake Galilee. Photo: Allen Browne, 2017.

The story leads us to the ultimate question: “*Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*” (verse 41 ESV). Rulers claim power over the land by drawing lines on maps, but no one controls the sea.

We fear what is outside our control. The disciples were unable to trust Jesus’ authority over what they thought was uncontrollable (verse 40).

Jesus used the journey to catch up on some sleep (compare 6:31), but to the disciples it felt as if Jesus did not care about them (verse 38).

When Jesus commands the winds and the waves (verse 39), I wonder if the disciples recalled any stories from the Old Testament? Pharaoh had no control over the Red Sea, but it obeyed the LORD. In the Psalms, the uncontrollable sea is often a symbol for God’s authority over a world that does not recognize his authority. Examples:

- *He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed (107:29).*
- *[God] stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations (65:7).*
- *You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them (89:9).*

That final one is particularly significant as Psalm 89 wrestles with the problem of David’s fallen kingship and whether God’s faithfulness will be seen in his Anointed.

4.4 Jesus' authority in gentile-controlled territory (5:1-20)

This is the most extreme example of a demonized person in the Bible. Jesus releases this guy from a legion of demons, something 2000 pigs couldn't cope with:

Mark 5:1-13 (NIV)

¹ They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. ² When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³ This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. ⁴ For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. ⁷ He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!"

⁸ For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!"

⁹ Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." ¹⁰ And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

¹¹ A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. ¹² The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them."

¹³ He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

The eastern shore of Lake Galilee was gentile territory. The region was called *Decapolis* meaning "ten cities" (verse 20). These cities had temples to pagan gods. The region had unclean activities like pig farming. It was not somewhere Jews wanted to be. Why did Jesus go there?

Immediately, Jesus was confronted by someone who lived among the dead (verse 3). Every attempt to restrain him had failed (verse 4). Day and night, the hillside graveyard echoed his anguished cries as he tortured himself—trying to find relief from this inner torment (verse 5). The evil power had so dehumanized him that the locals no longer saw him as one of them.

No matter how strong the hold of evil is on someone, Jesus never stops seeing them as a person. Jesus had authority to help him: "*Come out of **this man**, you impure spirit*" (verse 8).

Since Jesus is addressing the impure spirit, what we're hearing in verse 7 is probably the evil spirit speaking through the man (as it is in verse 9). The evil spirit recognizes Jesus' authority, and is terrified of being tortured—ironic, considering the torture it is inflicting on its victim (verse 7).

Jesus asks the spirit to identify itself (verse 9). Some exorcists today take this as standard procedure: they ask for the name of the spirit so they'll have the power to cast it out.²³ That's misguided. For starters, this was not standard procedure for Jesus: normally he silenced the evil spirit (e.g. 1:25; 3:12). Further, this demon did not give a name that helped Jesus with



Region of Decapolis. Source: *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 206.

the exorcism. Its evasive answer was effectively, “There’s a whole mob of us; you’re outnumbered” (verse 9). In any case, it makes no sense to trust anything a demon says. Lying is so inherent that the demon tried to put Jesus under oath! (verse 7)

The demons can’t resist the Messiah’s authority, but they don’t want to leave the area (verse 10). They may be questioning whether Jesus’ kingship includes this non-Jewish side of the Lake. In the end, they agree to leave the human if they can have the pigs instead (verse 12).

The pigs can’t cope. Tearing down the slope, the entire herd of 2000 pigs drown in the lake (verse 13). Did the demons drown as well? While that’s not spelled out, it is clear that no power of evil can prevent the Messiah restoring God’s reign to the earth.

Perhaps there’s an echo of what God did at the Red Sea. The army that supported Pharaoh’s oppression of God’s people found themselves hurled into the sea: “*The deep waters have covered them; they sank to the depths like a stone. Your right hand, LORD, was majestic in power; your right hand, LORD, shattered the enemy*” (Exodus 15:5-6). In the new covenant, Jesus has the authority to cast the enemy’s forces into the abyss, to set the earth free to be God’s kingdom.

²³ For example, Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2001), 182: “In an exorcism ritual, naming is a crucial part of trying to gain control of the demon.”

But not everyone is pleased:

Mark 5:14-17 (NIV)

¹⁴ Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened.

¹⁵ When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. ¹⁶ Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well.

¹⁷ Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

The pig farmers are not happy. Today in Western Australia, 2000 large white pigs would be worth tens of thousands of dollars, possibly \$100,000. Was it worth it?

We already noted how the locals had stopped seeing this man as a human being. It's very confronting to see him *sitting there* rather than running about issuing terrifying screams, *clothed* instead of in the shredded rags left from cutting himself, and *in his right mind* instead of inflicting his inner torment on everyone else. They'd learned to avoid the dehumanized thing he had become, but they had no idea how to respond to him as a human being (verse 15).

What did this Jewish visitor want? Did he want to control their territory? Did he want to impose Jewish Law (Torah) on them? Had he destroyed the pigs because they were unclean? What else would he take from them? That's why *the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region*, sending him back where he belonged (verse 17).

Mark 5:18-20 (NIV)

¹⁸ As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. ¹⁹ Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." ²⁰ So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

Verse 18 answers a huge theological question. **What does King Jesus do when he's not wanted?** What if the people of earth don't want Jesus ruling over us?

Imagine a delegation telling Caesar they didn't want him over their area! They'd be hanged for treason. King Jesus does not operate his authority through force. He has the authority, but he doesn't impose his authority where he's not welcome. Can this work? Can the world be saved if he waits for people to recognize his authority?

Of course, the man Jesus released from the power of evil wants to stick with the one who restored him as a human being. But instead of granting his request, the king gives him a regal commission: "*Go home and tell your own people*" Ah! That's how the people of this resistant region will hear the good news of King Jesus! (verse 19).

That's how the world discovers its Saviour. Transformed lives are evidence of Jesus' authority on earth, the stories of the kindness of the Lord who changes everything.

And that's what it looks like to share the gospel with people. Jesus did not commission the rescued man to tell the region what sinners they were for rejecting Jesus. That's not the gospel. The good news is that God has put Jesus in charge of the world, and the evidence that he's the only ruler worthy of the name is what he is doing for us, the liberating kindness of his leadership (verse 19). And it works (verse 20).

Still not convinced the gospel is the good news of Jesus' kingship? There are so many clues in this story!

This region on the eastern side of Lake Galilee had been part of Israel before the kingdom fell. The tribe of Manasseh lived on both sides of the Jordan River. That's why Jesus crossed over to share the gospel of the kingdom with these people as well.

The demons identified as *Legion*. A "legion" was the fundamental unit of soldiers in the Roman army. A first century reader would not have missed the obvious parallel between oppression by a legion of Rome and oppression by a legion of demons. And guess what was the symbol used by the local legion? Michael Bird (Australian) notes:

The horde of demons possessing the Gentile man are called "legion," which is the name of a Roman fighting unit comprised of about 6000 soldiers. Interestingly the Roman 10th legion, the Legio X Fretensis, was based in Syro-Palestine and had a wild boar as the insignia on its standards and seal.²⁴

Jesus is the divinely appointed king who liberates earth from every kind of oppression.

4.5 Jesus' touch overturns uncleanness and death (5:21-43)

With the criticism and plotting that's been taking place among the Bible scholars in the synagogues, this story is different. A synagogue leader named Jairus asks Jesus for help. But before Jesus can reach Jairus's house, an unclean person stops him.

Mark 5:21-24a (NIV)

²¹ When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake.

²² Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. ²³ He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." ²⁴ So Jesus went with him.

It's a great opportunity for Jesus to connect with the synagogue leader. But:

²⁴ Michael Bird, *Post-Colonial Interpretation of Mark 5:1-20*.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/euangelion/2017/04/post-colonial-interpretation-mark-51-20/>, 2017.

Mark 5:24b-34 (NIV)

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. ²⁵ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. ²⁶ She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. ²⁷ When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” ²⁹ Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

³⁰ At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?”

³¹ “You see the people crowding against you,” his disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’ ”

³² But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. ³³ Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

Part two of the story is about a nameless person who had no right being in a crowd of jostling people. She was ritually unclean, and everyone she touched became unclean (Leviticus 15:25-30). She understood this after twelve years in this condition. Yet she planned to touch Jesus' garment (verse 27)!

Her plan was to touch Jesus' clothes, receive her healing, and quietly slip away. No one would know. Her plan comes unstuck when Jesus stops and asks, “Who touched me?” She tries to hide in the crowd, as she has no doubt done so many times in the last decade. But Jesus doesn't give up. He felt something, and he wants to know the person's story (verse 32).

Now she's really terrified! She has to confess in front of all these people what a terribly selfish thing she has done. She has made the prophet unclean. She has hijacked Jesus' mission to save the life of a young girl from a leading family!

Jesus' response is not rebuke, but acceptance. He calls her *daughter*. It's more than a term of affection: she belongs in the family, in the community of God's people (as in Luke 13:16). Her trust in Jesus' leadership has made her whole, and now the king gives her his blessing of shalom: peace, wholeness, freedom from the physical and social suffering she has endured for more than a decade.

But what about the sick girl Jesus was supposed to be helping? The crowd are still wondering whether Jesus can continue that task when bad news arrives. It's too late:

Mark 5:35-43 (NIV)

³⁵ While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?”

³⁶ Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.”

³⁷ He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. ³⁸ When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly.

³⁹ He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” ⁴⁰ But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was.

⁴¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, “*Talitha kum!*” (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). ⁴² Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. ⁴³ He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Again, Jesus touched the dead body (*took her by the hand*). But instead of being defiled by death, the little girl has life from Jesus.

4.6 Conclusion

What stood out to you from the parables Jesus told in Mark 4? Have you noticed how Jesus’ parables describe the kingdom growing organically? What do you think of the suggestion that Jesus is the sower, explaining his frustration and his hope for the world?

Why do you think all three Synoptic Gospels weave together the stories of Jairus’ daughter and the bleeding women (compare Matthew 9:18-26; Luke 8:41-56). They’re not people whose stories would normally go together. Jairus’ daughter is young, from a well-regarded family, influential through the synagogue. The bleeding woman is older, with chronic suffering that’s reduced her to poverty, isolated from others and the synagogue. What do they have in common?

At the heart of the story is the way Jesus saw them. Everyone saw Jairus. The whole crowd flowed towards his house. People hadn’t noticed the bleeding woman. “*What do you mean, ‘Who touched me?’*” the disciples asked (verse 31) *But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it* (verse 32).

Jesus saw her. Jesus waited for her to show herself and tell her story. Jesus saw her not as an unwelcome intrusion of uncleanness but as a daughter of Abraham (verse 34). Father, I pray for eyes like Jesus, to see the people who are often overlooked.

In preparation for next week, read **Mark 6:1–7:23**.

5 How Jesus uses his authority (Mark 6:1–7:23)

The first five chapters of Mark's Gospel ask one big question: "Who is this?"

Jesus is the Messiah (1:1) who restores God's reign (1:2-3), the leader who renews God's people (1:8), the Son anointed by heaven (1:10-11) who defeats the enemy for his people (1:13). He is the good news of the kingdom in person (1:15), the Son of Man with authority to release us from sin's crippling effects (2:10), the doctor who restores rejected people (2:17), the Lord of the Sabbath (2:27), the God-appointed leader of the human family (3:35), the farmer replanting the earth for God's harvest (4:14), the ruler who commands even the restless sea (4:41). His authority extends beyond the Jews to the most desperate cases (5:19), and he overturns uncleanness and death in Israel (5:29, 42).

Does Mark's account of Jesus' kingship fill you with hope for the world?

5.1 Jesus as one of us (6:1-6)

The people of Nazareth saw Jesus only in terms of the family he grew up in:

Mark 6:1-6a (NIV)

¹ Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. ² When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?" ³ Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

⁴ Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honour except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home." ⁵ He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.

⁶ He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Society in the first century was much more collective, less individualistic than ours. That sense of belonging and of living for the group is essential to the kingdom of God, but the collective approach has its weaknesses too. Most notably, they could not see the calling God had placed on Jesus as Messiah because they could not see Jesus through any other lens than the place his society had assigned to him.

"Isn't this the carpenter?" they ask (verse 3). The word (*tektōn*) was not specific to those who worked with wood, so *builder* would be a better translation:

In a land of omnipresent stone and few trees, a craftsman worked primarily in stone, and much less in wood or metal. Such a craftsman is called "a builder," and he worked on all the structures mentioned by

Jesus in his parables, as described above, as well as wine-presses, millstones, olive press stones, tomb stones, cisterns, farm terraces, vineyards, watch towers, house extensions, etc.²⁵

The point is that they cannot see Jesus as anything but what his family defined him to be. Their *lack of faith* (verse 6) is their inability to recognize Jesus as God's Messiah and therefore to give him their loyalty as God's appointed leader for his people.

5.2 Twelve messengers with his authority (6:6-13)

So how does Jesus spread the good news that God's kingdom is arriving in him? He travels among the people. Then he gives his ambassadors authority to do what he was doing: enacting the fall of the reign of evil, the arrival of the reign of God:

Mark 6:6b-13 (NIV)

Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.

⁷ Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.

⁸ These were his instructions:

“Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. ⁹ Wear sandals but not an extra shirt.

¹⁰ Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town.

¹¹ And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

¹² They went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³ They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

In that society, it was a matter of honour for the community to look after the servants of the king who came to visit them and bring them news. King Jesus instructs his agents to travel light, relying on the community's hospitality (verses 8-9).

If the town will not provide hospitality, Jesus says to leave without taking anything—not even dust! Shaking out a garment was a way to provide evidence that you had nothing that belonged to the other person (compare Nehemiah 5:13), and shaking off the dust was a testimony to the town that you were taking nothing from that place (verse 11). That's not how Herod's servants would have reacted!

Jesus' agents called people to turn back to God in preparation for receiving the king God had sent them (verse 12). By driving out demons, they demonstrated that evil was losing its grip. By anointing people with oil, they represented the anointed ruler who cares for his people (verse 13).

²⁵ Ken M. Campbell, “What Was Jesus' Occupation?” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48:3 (2005): 519.

5.3 Kings in contrast (6:14-44)

The next story is about King Herod providing a meal for the rich and powerful, a meal that ends up revealing the power behind his reign (6:14-29). Then Jesus provides a meal for his followers, a meal that reveals the power behind his reign (6:30-44).

First, King Herod. This is **Herod Antipas**, the son of Herod the Great who killed the Bethlehem babies when Jesus was born (Matthew 2). After Herod the Great died, the region was divided under four rulers. During Jesus' adult life, Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and his brother Philip ruled the region to the north and east.

Jesus sent his twelve ambassadors throughout Galilee to enact the restoration of the kingdom of God (verses 7-13). That feels threatening for Herod:

Mark 6:14-16 (NIV)

¹⁴ King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

¹⁵ Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

¹⁶ But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

There's quite a story behind why Herod imprisoned and eventually executed John:

Mark 6:17-20 (NIV)

¹⁷ For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

¹⁹ So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, ²⁰ because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Mark shows some sympathy for Herod. Herod is not the enemy; he's more of a puppet in service to the power of evil (as in Ephesians 6:12).

Mark 6:21-22a (NIV)

²¹ Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

Birthdays don't feature much in Scripture. This was an opportunity for Herod to celebrate himself. Herod throws a party in his honour, a great banquet with the best

entertainment, for all the important people in Galilee. Herod wants everyone to know what a great guy he is, and how generously he rewards those who please him:

Mark 6:22b-25 (NIV)

The king said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.”²³ And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.”

²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?” “The head of John the Baptist,” she answered.

²⁵ At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”



Herod's birthday feast. Painting by Edward Armitage (1868)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod%27s_Birthday_Feast

Herod's birthday has suddenly taken a macabre twist. If he agrees, no one will remember the platters of the best food Galilee can offer in celebration of their generous king. The image seared in their minds will be the decapitated head of one who opposed Herod.

Mark 6:26-28 (NIV)

²⁶ The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her.²⁷ So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison,²⁸ and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.

Trapped in an evil beyond his control, Herod orders the execution of God's prophet.

John the Baptist's head arrives on a serving platter. Even in death, John is making one last prophetic statement. Every guest sees the real power behind Herod's claim to kingship: the power of death. It's through death that Herod reigns.

That's the nature of power in this world. That's the world God is rescuing by sending his Messiah. But if the rulers have done this to one who was merely a spokesman for God, what will they do to God's anointed ruler (the *Christ*)?

Mark 6:29-31 (NIV)

²⁹ On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.³¹ Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

Unlike Herod, Jesus has none of the trappings of kingship. He's not surrounded by *high officials, and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee* (verse 21). Yet people are so drawn to his leadership that *they did not even have a chance to eat* (verse 31, compare 3:20). He proposes escaping to a quiet place where they might be safe. taking time to process what just happened.

Mark 6:32-34 (NIV)

³² So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

³³ But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

People are so hungry for the kind of leadership Jesus provides! Six hundred years they'd been *sheep without a shepherd* (verse 34). Earthly leaders like Herod cannot save them. Only God's Anointed can restore us. People are hungry for his way of life. Listening to Jesus, nobody wants to go home.

Mark 6:35-37 (NIV)

³⁵ By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him.

“This is a remote place,” they said, “and it's already very late.

³⁶ Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

³⁷ But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “That would take more than half a year's wages!

Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

The need we see around us always feels overwhelming. We're servants of King Jesus, providing his care for people in his earthly realm, but the scale of the need is beyond us: in our currency, it would take tens of thousands of dollars to provide one basic meal for all these people (verse 37).

Mark 6:38-44 (NIV)

³⁸ “How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.”

When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”

³⁹ Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.

⁴¹ Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all.

⁴² They all ate and were satisfied, ⁴³ and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. ⁴⁴ The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Jesus asks, “What do you have?” He takes what we have, and makes it enough. This is a radically different economy to Herod. Herod taxed the people so he could pay for the armies and infrastructure. In the kingdom of Old Testament times, people paid a tithe to the temple plus whatever taxes their rulers required (e.g. 1 Kings 4:21; 2 Kings 3:4; 17:3-4; 23:33-35). But instead of levying taxes on us, King Jesus calls us to participate in caring for his people. That’s how the kingdom of God works.

We pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” (Matthew 6:11), and we share with each other all that God provides. In the kingdom of the resurrected Lord, *no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had, revealing God’s grace so powerfully at work in them that there were no needy persons among them* (Acts 4:32, 34).



We do this together, under the leadership of King Jesus. Everybody eats (verse 42), and there are leftovers! (verse 43).

We’ll never have a budget big enough to match the need, but we do have a God big enough to provide for everyone. The one who provides for the sower is the one who brings the harvest for the whole earth.

The miracle of the feeding of the 5000 reveals the life-giving source behind Jesus’ kingship. It’s not a kingdom established by killing his enemies but by giving his own life. The only blood the Messiah shed to establish this kingdom was his own.

What a contrast to Herod’s feast! Based on these two meals, how would you describe the difference between Herod’s authority and Jesus’?

	Herod’s meal (6:14-29)	Jesus’ meal (6:30-44)
What food was provided?	<i>gourmet banquet</i>	<i>basic (fish & bread)</i>
What was the setting?	<i>comfortable palace</i>	
Who were the guests?		
What entertainment?		
Purpose of the event?		
Who provided the food?		
What power was revealed behind each king’s reign?		

Can you recall a previous time when God’s people were escaping a tyrant, and God provided bread for them in the wilderness? (Hint: Exodus 16.)

5.4 The one who rules the sea (6:45-56)

This night the disciples were rowing hard, struggling to make headway through the sea, because the wind was against them. That changed when Jesus came to them:

Mark 6:45-52 (NIV)

⁴⁵ Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

⁴⁷ Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, ⁵⁰ because they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” ⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, ⁵² for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

What does verse 52 mean? What was it that *they had not understood about the loaves*? It seems the disciples were like everyone else: *ever hearing but never understanding* (3:11-12). They have not yet recognized Jesus as God’s anointed ruler (8:29).

Just as God came to his struggling people in Exodus, Jesus came to his struggling disciples. God was leading Jacob’s family out of tyranny, but they got stuck at the Red Sea until *Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen* (Psalm 77:19). That’s what Jesus is doing for them.

Jesus had provided bread in the wilderness, exactly as God had done in Exodus 16. Now he was giving them passage through the sea. Once again God was saving his people.

Mark 6:53-56 (NIV)

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. ⁵⁴ As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus.

⁵⁵ They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

Gennesaret was just southwest of Capernaum. Jesus is well known there. Although Jesus is not wearing the robes of a king, he fulfils the task of caring for his people.

5.5 What defiles God's people? (7:1-23)

Washing with water was the ritual provided by the Torah for people who'd become unclean (Leviticus 13–15). Pharisees extended these requirements to other situations where they feared uncleanness would capture God's people:

Mark 7:1-5 (NIV)

¹ The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus ² and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were **defiled**, that is, unwashed. ³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with **defiled** hands?”

We practice hand-washing for a very different reason. Before microscopes were invented in the 1590s, no one knew about germs. Experience taught them that people were less likely to get sick if they washed before eating, but they didn't know the reason. It was more about cultural norms, traditions, and fears.

They connected unclean food with unclean spirits. Eating unclean food made a person ritually unclean (Leviticus 11). The Pharisees worried that if you touched something unclean in the market, you could end up with an unclean spirit on your hands. Then if you ate without performing the cleansing ritual, you might swallow the evil spirit and it would then be living inside you. We'll see how Jesus' response confronts that fear (verses 14-23).

They already accused Jesus of having an impure spirit (3:30). Now they confront him publicly to frighten others away from following his example instead of their rules.

Mark 7:6-8 (NIV)

⁶ He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“ ‘These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

⁷ They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.’ [Isaiah 29:13]

⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

Religious people regularly add their own rules to God's.
But our rules have a habit of overturning what God said:

Mark 7:9-13 (NIV)

⁹ And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honour your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ [Exodus 20:12 and 21:17] ¹¹ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— ¹² then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. ¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

After reporting how Jesus responded to the Pharisees, Mark draws our attention to the deeper issue of whether what we eat can defile us. This is still a big topic for Mark's audience thirty years after these events.

Mark 7:14-23 (NIV)

¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can **defile** them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that **defiles** them.”

¹⁷ After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸ “Are you so dull?”

he asked. “Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can **defile** them? ¹⁹ For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” **(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)**

²⁰ He went on: “What comes out of a person is what **defiles** them.

²¹ For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and **defile** a person.”

According to Jesus, what you eat does not make you unclean. You won't get an unclean spirit because of what you eat. His argument is basic biology: food goes to the stomach, where the body digests what's useful, and excretes what's not.



At the time, Jesus was speaking to the people of the Sinai covenant who still needed to obey the kosher food laws. Yet, Jesus' teaching laid the foundation for a new covenant where being clean in God's eyes has nothing to do with what kind of food we eat.

That's what Mark said by adding his explanation in verse 19. In the new covenant, we do not become unclean in God's sight by eating particular foods. We are free to eat foods that would have made people unclean under the Sinai covenant. As with the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), the food laws are not a requirement of the new covenant.²⁶

5.6 Conclusion

How is Jesus' teaching shaping the way you think about the Old Testament? Jesus is the Messiah for the Jewish people as well as for gentiles, but we live under his leadership rather than the Sinai laws. Do you find yourself approaching the Bible like the Pharisees did, or like Jesus did?

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.....
.....

How does the gospel of the Messiah affect your approach to politics? As you read about the difference between the humanly appointed leader (King Herod) and the divinely appointed leader (Messiah Jesus), should Christians be involved in politics or is that a fruitless field that cannot save the world? What are your thoughts?

.....
.....
.....

What else is challenging the way you think and live as you listen to Jesus' teaching and leadership?

.....
.....
.....

In preparation for next time, read **Mark 7:24-8:38**.

²⁶ In fact, refusing to eat with brothers and sisters who don't follow the food laws constitutes a rejection of people Christ has accepted (Galatians 2:11-14). We cannot judge each other by what we eat (Romans 14:1-4).

6 The revelation of God's Christ (Mark 7:24–8:38)

So far in the Gospel of Mark, the Messiah has been taking care of his own people. The discussions have been with Pharisees and teachers of the Law (1:22; 2:6-24; 3:6, 22; 7:1-5) regarding things like fasting, keeping the Sabbath, the sinners versus the righteous, and clean versus unclean foods. There was only one excursion into gentile territory, and Jesus was asked to leave there (5:17).

All this changes as Jesus journeys north to the Phoenician coastal towns in the region of Syria. Here he begins to provide the same care for gentiles he has given his own people. It's here in gentile territory that Jesus' disciples receive the revelation of his identity as the God-anointed king, the Messiah anointed to lead the world.

6.1 God's reign beyond the Sinai covenant nation (7:24-37)

This is the moment Jesus extended his ministry to gentiles:

Mark 7:24-30 (NIV)

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret.

²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet.

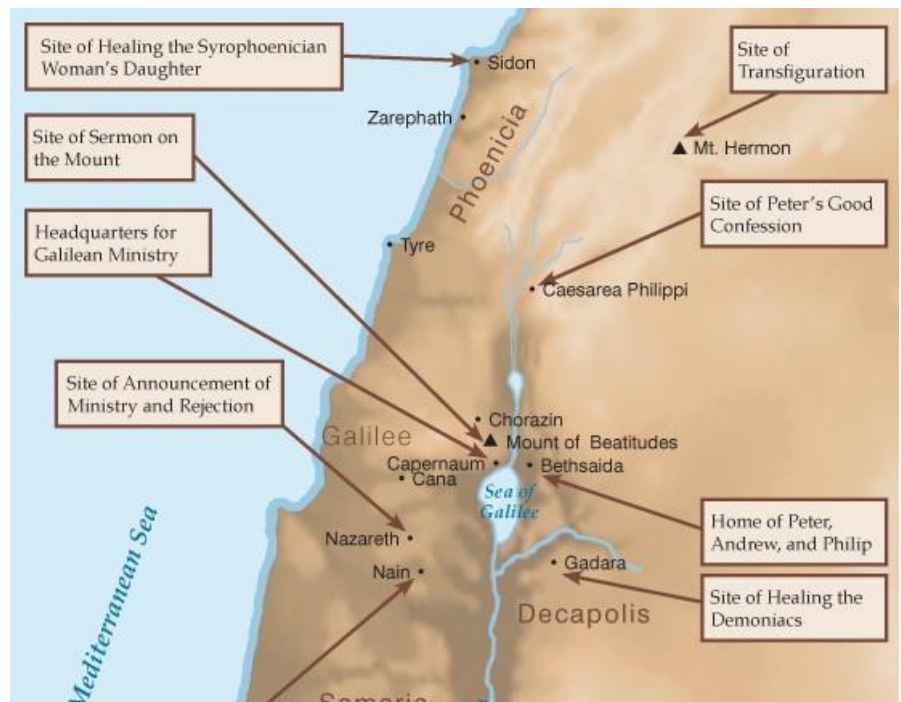
²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

²⁸ "Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

²⁹ Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.



"Map 16" in *Standard Bible Atlas* (Standard Publishing, 2006), 26.

What on earth is Jesus doing by comparing this Syrophenician woman to something non-human (a dog)? What would she have thought? How would she have felt?

Her quick response suggests she may have heard this before. She understands her southern neighbours thought of themselves as God's chosen people, so people of other nations were not part of God's family. She's not a daughter in Abraham's family (compare 5:34; Luke 13:16). She's not a child at God's table, as Jews understood themselves to be.

As a Greek (verse 26), she understood those ethnocentric attitudes. Greeks labelled everyone else as "Barbarians." It's like the father of the bride said in the 2002 movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*: "There are two types of people in the world: Greeks, and those who wish they were Greeks."

Jesus has focused his ministry on helping *the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Matthew 10:6; 15:24). She understands she has no right to ask the Jewish King for help. She accepts Jesus' view of her as an outsider to the Sinai covenant nation. And yet, if they are the blessed people of God, might those who come in contact with them receive some of the blessing also? (Compare Genesis 12:3; Zechariah 8:19-23.) Could she have a little something from the children's table?

Jesus is touched by the way she has not argued against the Sinai covenant family. She positioned herself as someone who might receive help from Israel's God. Jesus grants her request (verse 30).

In the words of William Lane (Bible commentator):

It seems appropriate to interpret Jesus' statement on the background provided by the OT and later Judaism where the people of Israel are designated as the children of God. Understood in this light, Jesus acknowledges the privileges of Israel and affirms that the time has not yet come for blessing to be extended to the Gentiles.²⁷

And yet, this is the beginning of Jesus' ministry to gentiles. Now all the other gentiles want help too. Jesus begins doing for them what he has done for his own people.

Last time Jesus was in the region of the Decapolis he was rejected. Now it's as if God has unlocked a door, a door Jesus found open through this Syrophenician woman:

Mark 7:31-37 (NIV)

³¹ Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³² There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

³³ After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. ³⁴ He

²⁷ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 261.

looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “*Ephphatha!*” (which means “Be opened!”).³⁵ At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

³⁶ Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷ People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

6.2 Providing for gentiles as he did for his own (8:1-13)

Does this story sound familiar?

Mark 8:1-13 (NIV)

¹ During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ² “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. ³ If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”

⁴ His disciples answered, “But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?”

⁵ “How many loaves do you have?” Jesus asked.

“Seven,” they replied.

⁶ He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so. ⁷ They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. ⁸ The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

⁹ About four thousand were present. After he had sent them away, ¹⁰ he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.

¹¹ The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. ¹² He sighed deeply and said, “Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it.” ¹³ Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.

The feeding of the 4000 is reminiscent of the feeding of the 5000 (Mark 6:32-44).

Once again Jesus asks the disciples to provide what they have. This time they have seven loaves (verse 5) and a few small fish (verse 7). *They all ate and were satisfied* (verse 8) is almost identical to 6:42. Why does Mark include both accounts?

The difference is the audience. The feeding of the 4000 takes place in gentile territory. Jesus had left the Syrian coast and gone *down the Sea of Galilee into the region of the Decapolis*. (7:31), That's gentile territory, on the eastern side of Galilee.

This is a new phase of Jesus' ministry. Before discovering the responsiveness of the Syrophenician woman, Jesus had concentrated on his ministry to his own people. Now he sees that God has opened the door for him to use his authority in gentile territory as well, so he begins a new phase: ministry to the gentiles.

Gentiles are following Jesus, but he doesn't forget his own people (verse 13). But is he safe there? Or as the community leaders causing disaffection about him there?

6.3 The yeast of the Pharisees (8:14-21)

What is *the yeast of the Pharisees*?

Mark 8:14-16

¹⁴ The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. ¹⁵ “Be careful,” Jesus warned them. “Watch out for the **yeast** of the Pharisees and that of Herod.”

¹⁶ They discussed this with one another and said, “It is because we have no bread.”

Unsure what Jesus meant? That's not surprising: the disciples didn't get it either.

Yeast (or leaven) is a rising agent, something like the “starter” we use for sourdough. Yeast was a metaphor for **influence**, because: *A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough* (Galatians 5:9; 1 Corinthians 5:6).

The Pharisees used this metaphor to support their programme of naming and shaming “sinners.” Since evil in the community spreads like yeast in the dough, they saw it as their business to root out the people they identified as contaminating everyone (2:16).

Jesus spun the story the other way. He said the kingdom of God is as influential as yeast: slowly yet pervasively spreading through an enormous batch of flour (three buckets!), until it worked through all of it (Matthew 13:33).

So was *the yeast of the Pharisees* a good influence or a bad one? No doubt they saw themselves as saving the community, but Jesus saw them as a bad influence—turning the people against the Messiah:

- They were driving away the very people who needed the Saviour (2:13-17, 24).
- They aligned with Herod's supporters to get rid of Jesus (3:6), so that's why Jesus spoke of *the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod* (verse 14).
- They accused Jesus of siding with the devil (3:22).
- They viewed Jesus as defiled because he did not follow their traditions (7:1-5).

Jesus warned his disciples about the infectious evil (yeast) of the Pharisees. It was spreading through the Jewish community, as they manipulated people with guilt.

Ironically, the very mention of *the yeast of the Pharisees* was enough to make the disciples feel guilty! They didn't know what Jesus meant, but they responded, "Oh, no! We forgot to bring bread!" (verse 16). It's very easy to trigger responses of guilt, shame, and failure, even when we don't intend to do so.

Mark 8:17-21

¹⁷ Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸ Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? ¹⁹ When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

"Twelve," they replied.

²⁰ "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

They answered, "Seven."

²¹ He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

The irony is that they're feeling guilty for not providing for Jesus, with little understanding of how he is providing for them. They're a bit like the Israelites in the wilderness, complaining that they have no food, not understanding the provision of the one who said, "*I will rain down bread from heaven for you*" (Exodus 16:4). And when God did provide bread for them, they didn't recognize it: *They said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you"* (Exodus 16:15-16).

That's how John later understood what the loaves and fishes were pointing to. They were a sign of the provision the God of heaven was giving to give life to his people (John 6). They don't yet see him for who he is, but that recognition is coming (8:29).

6.4 Seeing clearly (8:22-26)

This seems like a very strange story where the healing doesn't arrive all at once:

Mark 8:22-26 (NIV)

²² They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"

²⁴ He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

²⁵ Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

²⁶ Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village."

The initial restoration of the blind man is partial: he sees, but he doesn't yet *see everything clearly* (verse 25). The way Mark has placed this story suggests he is highlighting the unclear picture of Jesus the disciples have until their eyes are opened and they recognize Jesus for who he is:

- Jesus said to them, "*Do you still not understand?*" (verse 21)
- Peter said: "*You are the Messiah!*" (verse 29)

Bible commentator Ben Witherington expressed it like this:

The miracle recorded at 8:22–26 is meant to be seen in light of the spiritual blindness of the disciples just mentioned. Jesus is the one who opens the eyes of the blind. ... This miracle visually demonstrates the spiritual malady of the disciples. But note that it, unlike others, occurs in two stages, and so too in what follows in 8:27ff. The disciples' understanding of who Jesus is and his ministry likewise occurs in two stages.²⁸

6.5 Recognizing Jesus' identity (8:27-30)

We've now reached the hinge of Mark's Gospel, the moment when Jesus' identity is revealed:

Mark 8:27 (NIV)

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

It's been three years since Jesus called the fishermen to follow him (1:17). They've seen Jesus taking care of his people throughout Galilee. They've seen him denounced by the local power brokers (Pharisees and Herodians, 2:16, 24; 3:6), and the Torah scholars from Jerusalem (3:22; 7:1-5).

Starting with the Syrophenician woman, they've seen his leadership extend beyond the twelve tribes of Israel to people of other nations as well (7:38). Just as he had provided for the 5000 among his own people, he provided for the 4000 in gentile territory.

Jesus is ready to ask the disciples the most crucial of all questions: the identity of the Messiah. You might expect him to take them south to Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom established by David (2 Samuel 5). Instead, he took them north to Caesarea Philippi (verse 27). Why there?

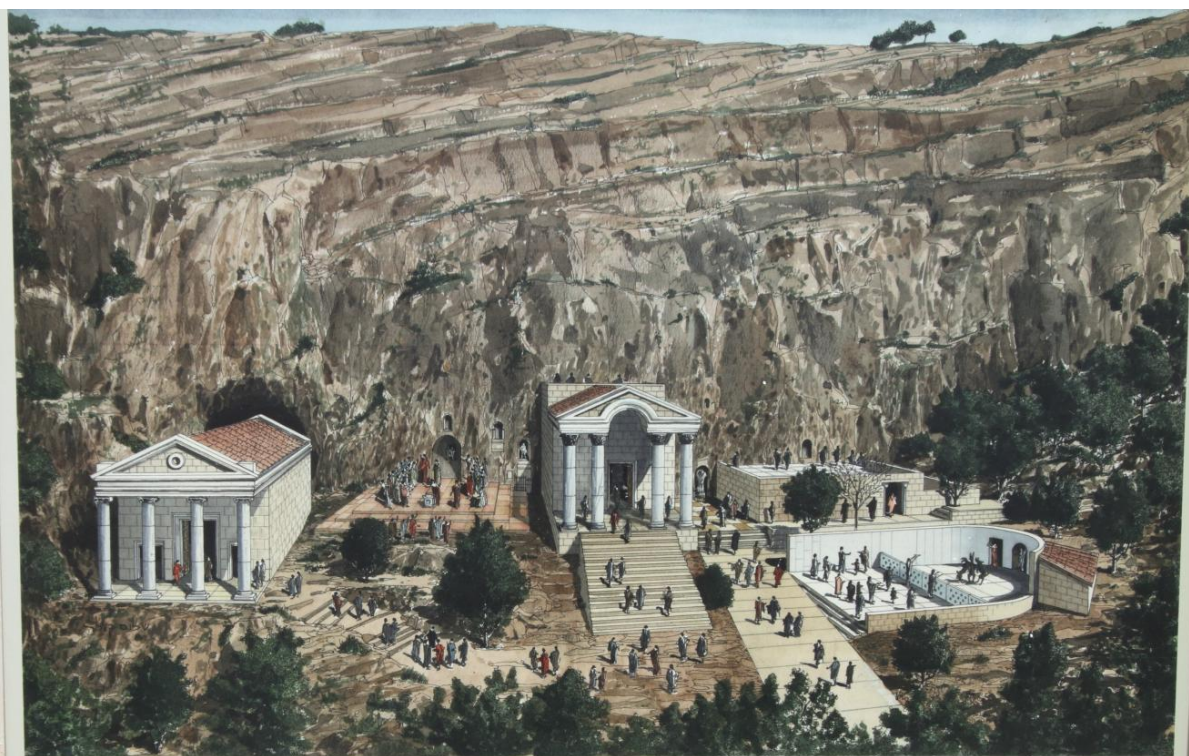
²⁸ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2001), 238.

A Bible dictionary provides background on the religious and political significance of Caesarea Philippi:

A city at the southwest base of Mt. Hermon ... on the main source of the Jordan River. ... A nearby cave ... housed a shrine in antiquity, which may have been dedicated to the rites of Baal-gad or Baal-hermon

Greek settlers in the area dedicated the shrine to “Pan and the Nymphs,”

In 20 B.C. the district was given by Augustus to Herod the Great, who erected at Paneas a splendid temple of white marble in honor of the emperor. After the death of Herod in 4 B.C. the area became part of the tetrarchy of Philip, who rebuilt and beautified the town, naming it Caesarea as a compliment to the emperor Augustus. Philip added his own name to distinguish the city from Caesarea on the coast of Sharon.²⁹



ARTIST IMPRESSION OF THE SANCTUARY OF PAN

LEGEND

- 1 THE TEMPLE OF AUGUSTUS
- 2 THE GROTTO OF THE GOD PAN
- 3 THE COURT OF PAN & THE NYMPHS
- 4 THE TEMPLE OF ZEUS
- 5 THE COURT OF NEMESIS
- 6 THE TOMB TEMPLE OF THE SACRED GOATS
- 7 THE TEMPLE OF PAN & THE DANCING GOATS



הצעת שיחזור למתחם המקודש לאל פאן

מקרא

- 1 מקדש אוגוסטוס
- 2 מערת האל פאן
- 3 רחבת האל פאן והנימפות
- 4 מקדש זאוס
- 5 חצר נמיזיס
- 6 מקדש קבר העזים הקדושות
- 7 מקדש פאן והעזים המרקדות

A sign at Caesarea Philippi, representing how it was in the first century. (Photo: Allen Browne, 2017)

²⁹ W. Ewing and R. K. Harrison, “Caesarea Philippi,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Eerdmans, 1979–1988), 569.

Caesarea Philippi was a place of idolatry where people worshipped all the powers they believed were at work in the world. There were temples to Pan (Greek nature god) and Zeus (head god of the Greeks). There was a temple to Augustus, the Roman Emperor who ruled the known world. There was a cave that the locals regarded as the entrance to the underworld, the spiritual powers that lived beneath the earth.

In the face of all these symbols of power people attributed to gods, spirits, and rulers, Jesus asked his disciples about his authority, “Who do people say I am?”

Mark 8:28-30 (NIV)

²⁸ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

²⁹ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the **Messiah**.”

³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

This is the first time since Mark's opening statement (1:1) that we've heard Jesus named as the Christ (ESV) or Messiah (NIV). What's the significance of recognizing Jesus as the Christ? What does that mean?

The word *Christ* comes from the Greek word meaning anointed (*christos*). The word *Messiah* comes from the Hebrew word meaning anointed (*mā·šîaḥ*). To say Jesus is the Christ is to say he is the heaven-appointed ruler to lead the people of the earth. For the rest of his Gospel, Mark keeps reminding us that Jesus is the Christ (e.g. 9:41; 13:6, 21-22). It's such an important term that he explains it with these parallel phrases:

- The Christ is *the son of David* (12:35)
- The Christ is *the son of the Blessed One* who reigns in the heavens (14:61)
- The Christ is *the King of Israel* (15:32)

The disciples have finally recognized Jesus as their God-appointed king. He is the one who will restore the kingdom of God that had fallen to the nations. So, will he deal with the nations also? God had promised his anointed king, “*Ask me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession*” (Psalm 2:8).

That's the significance of Jesus bringing them north to Caesarea Philippi.

But why did Jesus warn them not to tell anyone about him? (verse 30) Jesus goes on to explain why.

6.6 What kind of king? (8:31-33)

It's not safe for them to tell people that Jesus is the anointed ruler:

Mark 8:31 (NIV)

³¹ He then began to teach them that the **Son of Man** must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

Jesus responds to Peter's word *Messiah* by referring to himself as *the Son of Man*, that is, the human descendant who receives the dominion God gave the human in the beginning. (See discussion on page 23.) Although Jesus is the heir of humanity who receives the kingdom, the rebellion against God's kingship will not welcome him. The authorities that currently hold power in Jerusalem—the *elders*, the *chief priests*, and the *Torah teachers*—will reject Jesus as a false Messiah worthy of death (14:61-63). But God will vindicate his Messiah by overriding his execution, bringing him back from the dead to rescue and reign over his people.

This is not how Peter imagined Jesus' kingship. He probably expected something along the lines of Zechariah 9:9-10: a son of David riding into Jerusalem to a rapturous welcome from his people, making peace with the nations. The LORD had promised to deal with his enemies, bringing them under his throne (Psalm 110:1). In Peter's mind, a dead Messiah is a failed Messiah. Peter wants to put Jesus right:

Mark 8:32-33 (NIV)

³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Does Jesus think Peter is Satan? Remember, *śā-ṭān* was the Hebrew word for enemy. Rather than translate it as a proper name, it would make more sense to translate it as adversary: "*Get behind me, enemy.*" By telling Jesus to take a different path to kingship, Peter acted as an opponent of the Messiah, as the Enemy did in Matthew 4:8-11.

What *human concerns* were motivating Peter here? (verse 33) Now that he understands Jesus as anointed king, Peter expects to get a significant portfolio in Jesus' government, perhaps even Prime Minister. Peter doesn't want a cross; he wants power. That's exactly what's wrong with the world. It's the reason for the rebellion against God. It's the reason humans dominate each other. It's the reason the kingdoms captured God's people (Israel and Judah) preventing them from being a kingdom of God. It's the reason the rulers in Jerusalem will put Jesus to death. Peter has lost focus on what God cares about (the release of his people from the reign of sin and death) because he's focused on what he cares about.

6.7 The cross as the way to the kingdom (8:34–9:1)

Jesus explains how the kingdom of God is established not by taking power over people but by giving up everything—the way of the cross:

Mark 8:34-35 (NIV)

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their **cross** and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

This is the first mention of the *cross* in Mark's Gospel. Jesus just described how he would become king: not by overpowering the Jerusalem leaders, but by trusting his Father to raise him up after they killed him (verse 31). This is a radically different way to use power, for the kingdom of God comes through sacrificial love, not force. The Messiah gives his life to save the world from the powers of sin and death.

The king asks his followers to *take up their cross* too (verse 34). What does that mean?

The cross was an execution device Rome used to demonstrate its power over its enemies. The cross was a slow, agonizing, torturous death, intended for terrorists like Barabbas who'd *committed murder in the uprising* (Mark 15:7). Those who led the rebellion against Roman occupation were crucified in very public places so all who passed by would get the message: you lose your life if you oppose Rome.

In effect, Jesus is saying, “Don't wait for Rome to crucify you. Take up your own cross and follow me where I'm going. Everyone who sees you will know you've given your life for me and my kingdom.”

To take up my cross is to give my life for something other than myself, namely Jesus and the kingdom community he is leading. Taking up my cross is denying myself, the opposite of trying to save my life for myself. It is giving my life for the good news so the way of the cross will save not only the self but the world (verse 35).

We often speak of salvation through the cross of Christ. Jesus says that only works as we also take up our cross, choosing the powerless path of service instead of asserting ourselves over others. Salvation comes to the world as the people of the crucified and resurrected Lord follow him by giving our lives to him and in his service, rather than seeking the self.

Mark 8:36-37 (NIV)

³⁶ “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”

In verses 35-36, Jesus spoke of giving/losing one's **life** (*psychē* in Greek). The same word is translated **soul** in verses 36-37. (See the NIV footnote after the word *life* in verse 35.) *Psychē* has a range of meanings in different contexts, but Jesus has not changed topic: verses 36-37 express the same thoughts as verses 35-36.

The problem is that we think of *life* and *soul* very differently. We use the word *life* for what we're experiencing in the present, and *soul* for our disembodied existence when we die (as in the 2020 Pixar animation, [Soul](#)). On that basis, we hear *forfeit their soul* (in verse 36) as if Jesus said, "will not go to heaven when they die."

Jesus was actually asking, "How would a person benefit from gaining the whole world if they lost their life in the process? What would a person trade for their life?"

The Greek legends about Alexander the Great say that after he'd conquered the whole world from Macedonia to Persia, he wept because there was no more to conquer. How he lost his life is uncertain, but he was only 32 years old when he died in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar II in Babylon in 323 BC. Many who tried to conquer the world lost their lives in the process. As Jesus said elsewhere, "*All who draw the sword will die by the sword*" (Matthew 26:52).

That's the contrast Jesus is making. Earthly kingdoms take up the sword to gain the world, but the Messiah's kingdom takes up the cross.

Mark 8:38 (NIV)

³⁸ "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

To be crucified was shameful. Impaling you on a cross said you were a criminal of the worst kind. The choice to take up one's cross rather than to seek power over each other can look shameful to people who lust for power over each other without regard for our heavenly sovereign's authority (compare 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16.)

So, choose! Would you prefer to be ashamed in front of the power brokers of this world, or to be ashamed before the Human Descendent who received dominion by giving his life for his people? In the words of Daniel 7, do you want to be like the beasts who tear each other apart to build their kingdoms, or like the Son of Man to whom the Ancient of Days gave the kingdom through the support of the angels rather than a human forces?

When does Jesus receive the kingdom from his Father without human forces? Is Jesus talking about his return at the end of the era when *every knee will bow to him and every tongue acknowledge that Messiah Jesus is Lord?* (Philippians 2:9-11) Or did Jesus already received his Father's glorious authority with heaven's support when he was raised from the tomb and ascended the throne to reign with his Father?

This is Jesus' answer to that question:

Mark 9:1 (NIV)

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

The simplest way to understand this is to say that, even though Jesus had told them to take up their crosses and give their lives (verses 34-37), they would not all die with him when he suffered and was killed at the hands of the elders and chief priests and Torah teachers (verse 31).

Jesus was concerned that his followers were in danger of being killed also when he was arrested and crucified as the leader of a rebellion. That's why he asked for his followers to be released (John 18:3-9). Here he is assuring them that some of them would live to see Jesus raised with all authority in heaven and on earth, the resurrected king restoring God's reign to the nations of the world (Matthew 28:18-20).

And they did: *He presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God* (Acts 1:3). They saw him ascend to the Father (Acts 1:9) where he shares his Father's throne, *seated at the right hand of God* (Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 9:1; 12:2).

The only one who did not survive to see the risen and ascended Christ was Judas. All the others *did not taste death before they saw the kingdom of God arrive in power* in their resurrected and enthroned Lord.

6.8 Conclusion

What questions do you still have on the first half of Mark's Gospel?

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Our next course covers the rest of Mark's Gospel, over six Wednesday evenings (12 Aug.– 16 Sept. 2026).

[Register](#) for *Mark 9–16: Formed in God's Story, with Allen Browne.*

