

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.

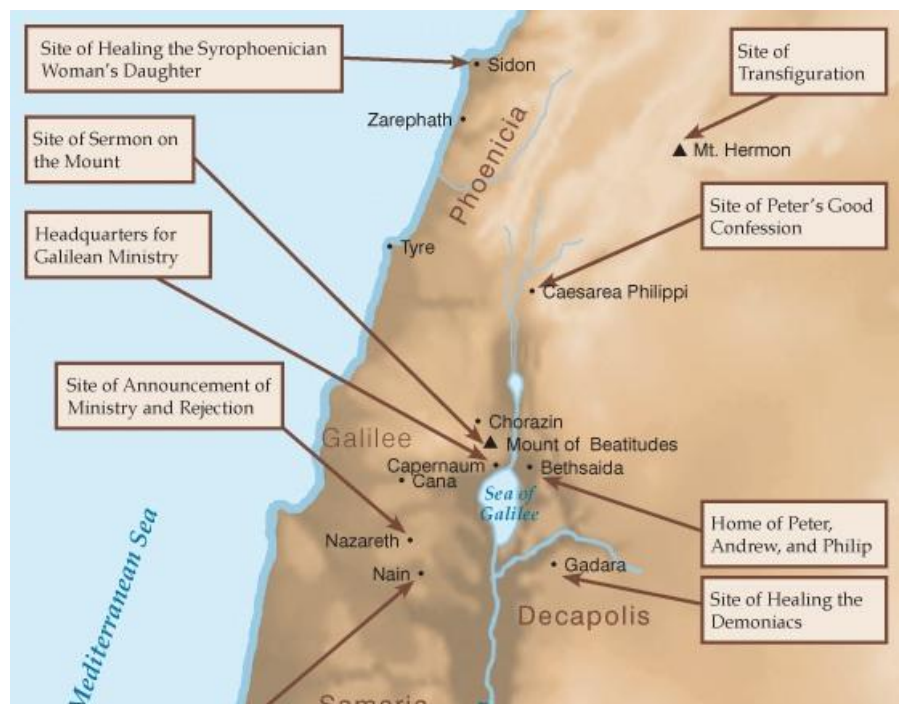
²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

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 depicted 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).

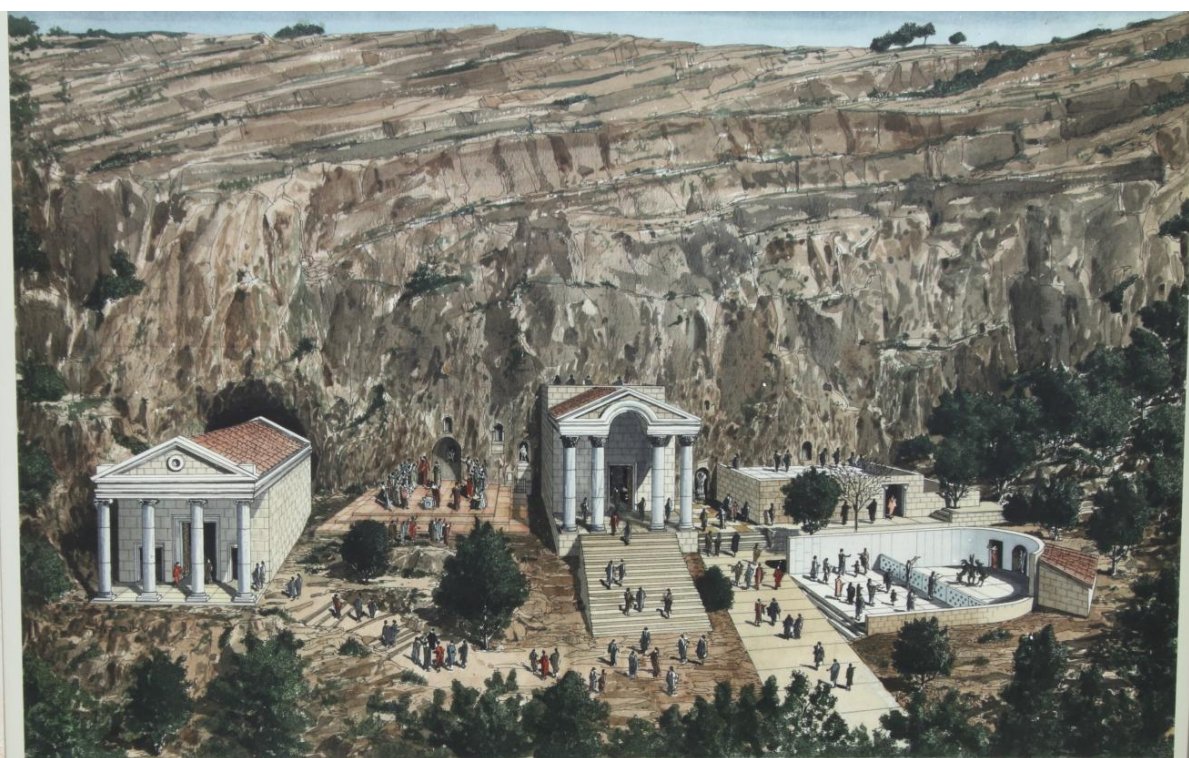
Starting with the Syrophenician woman, they've seen his leadership extend beyond the twelve tribes of Israel to people of other nations as well (7:38). Just as he had provided for the 5000 among his own people, he provided for the 4000 in gentile territory.

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 not 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?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

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.*

