

Tales of The Kingdom

Teaching Mark's Gospel

Dave Williams (March 2022)

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1. Background

The presumed author is Jon Mark. This is the young man who was present in the Garden of Gethsemane and flees. He also accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey but did not last the course and turned back. This led to Paul and Barnabas arguing with Barnabas wishing to replace Mark on the next journey. Barnabas stuck with Mark and this seems to have paid off in terms of long term discipleship with Paul later writing favourably about Jon Mark and with him being used to write this Gospel. Tradition holds that Mark based his Gospel on Peter's memories and sermons and wrote from Rome.¹ This would also fit with primarily a Gentile target audience.²

Matthew was traditionally considered to be the first of the Gospels written. However, modern scholarship considers Mark earlier. This is because the first three Gospels, Matthew Mark and Luke show strong relationships to each other. It's not just that they cover the same issues but seem to borrow significant passages from each other – hence they are called “The synoptic Gospels” meaning they should be read together.

We can trace priority because Matthew and Luke both contain sections that seem to be drawn from Mark along with additional common source material (sometimes referred to as Q) and their own unique material. This can make things sound as though Q existed as a collection of sayings in its own right as a proto-Gospel however, there is no evidence that such a manuscript existed. It may also tempt us to think in terms of the Gospel's being written many years later relying on second hand documents. This has been the liberal view of Scripture with scholars claiming that the Gospels were not written by eye-witness disciples but over 100 years later by people using the names of Biblical characters as pseudonyms.

Again, there is no evidence for such claims apart from the reluctance of some to believe in the inspiration of Scripture and the truth of the accounts describing Christ's incarnation, miracles, death and resurrection. It is more reasonable to assume that the Gospels were written by eye witnesses who knew each other and so interacted with each other and each other's work. Just as you would expect the preachers at church to be talking to each other and reading one another's sermons as they prepare.

We believe that Mark was written somewhere in the late AD50s with the other two Gospels written a little later, probably in the 60s.³ We have good evidence that all the Gospels were written prior to AD70 and we find that evidence in Mark 13. There, Jesus prophesies the destruction of the temple. This happened in AD70. Now, it is normal in scripture that when a fulfilment has taken place that an author will draw attention to that to prove the truth of the prophecy. AD70 was within the lifetime of the Gospel writers and so it would have been reasonable for them to mention this fulfilment if their Gospels were written later. However, they do not which suggests that when they wrote, the Temple and Jerusalem were still standing.⁴

The style of the Gospel gives a feel of pace and punchiness. This is created through three means. First there is the length of the Gospel. It is the shortest and it is possible to read it in 1 hour. Infact it would have been read aloud to listeners. It is primarily narrative with the extended dialogue and commentary found in other Gospels missing. Secondly, the sentence structure is simple with

¹ Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 95.

² Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 95.

³ Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 99. Though the dating is uncertain and contested. Lane dates it in the 60s and associates its tracing of a suffering theme to Nero and the fire in London which caused persecution. See Lane, -, 18.

⁴ See JAT Robinson, *Redating The New Testament*, 13-30.

frequent use of the word “and” so the pattern is “and then and then ... and then” Thirdly, Mark uses a grammatical tense sometimes referred to as “the historic present tense.” This means that he talks about events in the past but uses present tense verbs to give an sense of immediacy and nowness.

There is one disputed section. At the end of the Gospel, the oldest manuscripts concludes with Mark 16:8. This does leave the ending abrupt finishing with fear and confusion rather than clarity and hope. However, it also means that the Gospel concludes by pointing us back to Galilee, perhaps an invitation to retrace the events of the early part of the Gospel with eyes opened by the resurrection.

Verses 9-20 are now generally presumed to have been added later due to their absence from early manuscripts and differences in terms of style. Though at what stage is uncertain. I guess it is possible that Mark himself wrote a later epilogue which was not included in all copies of the Gospel that circulated in the early days.⁵

There is a similar challenge with the account of the woman caught in adultery in John 8. However, these challenges should not undermine our confidence in the infallibility of Scripture. First, when we say that Scripture is without error we are referring to the original manuscripts. We know that people throughout history may have made mistakes. Secondly, we can see here that there are in fact very few questions of this type and where they do exist there is openness. This gives us great confidence that we can rely on the word of God that we find in our Bibles today.

⁵ For more detail see Lane, *Mark* 593-605. See also, France, *Mark*, 685-688.

2. Structure

The Gospel can be broken down as follows⁶

- A. Prologue: (1:1-15)
- B. Part 1: Ministry in and around Galilee (1:14-8:30)
 - In Galilee (1:16-6:13)
 - Withdrawal from Galilee (6:13-9:1)
- C. To Jerusalem (9:1-16:8)
 - Journey to Jerusalem (8:31-10:52)
 - A week in Jerusalem (11:1-13:37)
 - Betrayal, trial and death of Jesus (14:1-15:47)
 - The Resurrection (16:1-8)
- D. Epilogue (if included) (16:9-20)

⁶ See also Lane, Mark, 29-32

3. The nature and purpose of the book

It is worth thinking a little bit more about the nature and purpose of the book by considering its style and structure as well as comparing it to other examples of literature both ancient and modern. This will help us consider how we should approach it in terms of preaching and teaching.

One recent obsession has been with so called "Gnostic Gospels." These were a collection of manuscripts found at a place called Nag Hammadi in the 20th century written in Coptic rather than Greek and Hebrew. There have been attempts to give these "gospels" equal footing with the four we find in the Bible (The canonical Gospels). However, they stand out as different both in terms of style and theology. Stylistically rather than offering detailed narrative, they present loosely connected lists of sayings and snippets of supposed conversations between Jesus and his disciples. Theologically they are rooted in a tradition (Gnosticism) that sees nature and physical humanity as evil and only spirit as good. The result is a shadowy, ethereal Jesus who offers wisdom but fails to act to deliver and save.

By contrast, the Gospels including Mark offer us a solid narrative of a real, physical Jesus. Instead of shadowy 2D at a distance we get 3D up close. This first of all creates familiarity for us as it makes the Gospels similar to modern biographies and indeed to similar genres circulating in the Greco-Roman world of Mark's day. But they also are rooted in the Jewish Old Testament approach where even the prophetic books interweave narrative with prophecy. The Jews were not just interested in knowledge and wisdom, they wanted to hear what God said but they also wanted to know what God had done. The God of Old and New Testament is not just one who offers wisdom from on high but who gets involved in creation. In Genesis 2, God gets his hands dirty by stooping into the soil to mould dust into humans. In the Gospels, God again willingly gets his hands dirty by stepping into time and space, by reaching down into the dust and taking on human nature.

You will also notice that the Gospels give disproportionate attention to different aspects of Jesus' life. In that sense they are not straight forward biographies. The second half of the Gospel focuses us in on the last weeks of Jesus' earthly life as he heads to Jerusalem. Six chapters out of 16 are about one week in Christ's life, 3 are given over to a couple of days as we zoom in on his death and resurrection. This lop-sidedness is true of all 4 Gospels but this point is made even more starkly in Mark where we are not even given a birth account.

Additionally, it seems that the Gospel writers are not primarily concerned with strict chronology so much as with order material around themes.

This reminds us that our primary concern when reading the Gospels is The Gospel. Our focus should be on the Cross which casts a shadow across the book. We are not looking to Jesus as first and foremost a good teacher or as a great example but through the book we are getting to know our saviour. This doesn't mean that we cannot learn from his example and teaching but that isn't the primary purpose. For example, to be sure there are things to learn about healing from Jesus' methods but Mark isn't giving us a handbook on how to heal but rather we are meant to learn more about the Gospel and the greatest work of healing from what Jesus does.

To take one example, have a look at Mark 8:22-26. Jesus heals a blindman but it happens in two stages. The man begins to see but without focus and clarity. Now clearly, Jesus' ability to heal wasn't defective, he didn't make a mistake first time round and furthermore, we wouldn't follow this as a pattern when praying for someone now. This event happens though at a significant point as

Jesus begins to prepare his disciples to go to Jerusalem and for Mark it is right in the middle of his account. This is the turning point. Jesus begins to teach increasingly about the Cross and his disciples who are starting to get that he is special, a prophet, a healer, maybe even the Messiah still cannot grasp exactly who he is and what he has come to do (Mark 8:27-38). They need their eyes to be fully opened and it will take the actual crucifixion and resurrection for this.

Does this mean that Marks' Gospel can only be used evangelistically? Well it certainly has been used fantastically in that way, for example through the Christianity Explored course. However, this book is for believers. You see, we can slip into legalism when trying to live the Christian life but actually the Gospel is for the whole of our life. It is the Cross and resurrection that will give us the power to live new lives in Christ. As we teach through the Gospel we should apply each passage to our lives through the lens of calvary.

4. Some big themes in Mark

a. Kingdom

The theme of God's kingdom is significant to all of the Gospels but particularly stands out in Matthew and Mark. Matthew refers to it as The Kingdom of Heaven, this links to a Jew's reluctance to even speak out God's name so that other words are used in place of "God" or "YHWH." Heaven as the place where God rules from therefore serves to represent God himself. Mark, writing for Gentiles is under no such restrictions when speaking of God's Kingdom.

The Kingdom is described as "at hand" or near in 1:15. This raises questions about whether or not it has fully arrived. We might think of it in terms of growing authority and influence so that God's kingdom is both "here" and "near." God's reign is seen in the Gospel because Christ the King is present with his people but his rule is resisted and Satan still has power, therefore the defeat of Satan on the Cross brings in a greater realisation of God's rule. It is nearer still. The work of the Holy Spirit brings that rule nearer still. However, we live in the now and not yet. Christ is reigning in our hearts but we await the day of consummation when he returns.

The kingdom is united and strong, at war with the enemy not with itself (3:24). It is secret, hidden from worldly eyes but revealed to God's people (4:11). Chapter 4 is significant as Christ uses parables to teach his disciples truths about this secret kingdom. Like planted seed, it is something that looks small but grows powerful and fruitful through death and resurrection (as seed falls into the ground and dies).

If some of Jesus' disciples saw his kingdom come in power before their deaths (9:1) then this reminds us that the kingdom's inauguration is associated with the Gospel and Calvary.

Entering the kingdom is of first importance and we need to be ready to forsake everything, life and limb (9:47) and riches and power for it (10:23-25). It belongs not to the powerful and proud but the weak and humble, those who are like children (10:14-15).

b. Repentance

Although the word features minimally - just at the start in 1:4, this sets up a key theme of the Gospel. A willingness to leave behind wealth and riches, to become like a child and pursue the way of the cross is about choosing repentance.

c. The Son of Man

This is Jesus's preferred identification of himself (see 2:10; 8:31; 8:38; 9:9; 9:12; 9:31; 10:33; 10:45 etc). It may be seen as a title that focuses on humility rather than glory and emphasises his humanity. However, the particular significance comes out in 3:26, where Jesus prophesies about the last days. Here we are promised his return and we "will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." This is a reference to Daniel 7:13 where it is "one like a son of man" who receives authority and power from the Ancient of Days. Christ as Son of Man therefore has divine authority.

This helps us to think about how Jesus is fully God and fully man so that in him, humanity is reconciled to God and restored to its creation position with responsibility to fill and subdue God's World. Of course our mandate now is to do this through spreading the good news and making disciples, not through re-populating the world.

d. The Cross

As mentioned earlier, the whole Gospel is in the shadow of the Cross. At the crucial turning point at the halfway point we are told three times that Jesus must suffer, die and then rise three days later (8:31; 9:31; 10:34). Later, Jesus will use the imagery of the Temple to again repeat that he must be killed (destroyed) but rise (rebuild) three days later (Mark 14:58; 15:29). To take up my own cross therefore is to be ready to die to myself and my old life for Christ (8:34).

5. Some thoughts on teaching and preaching through Mark's Gospel

It is possible to work through the Gospel in one of a few ways. This might include

1. Picking up a number of themes and tracing them through the Gospel as a series of sermons on The Kingdom of God, The Son of Man, Suffering and the Cross etc.
2. A longer and detailed series might have a look at each small pericope or paragraph in detail with each sermon focusing on a specific event or saying.
3. Between these two options is an approach that teaches on large sections. This might follow the breaks I've suggested below in the overview which divides the Gospel up into about 16 sections, roughly though not entirely following the chapter breaks.⁷

My preference is the third option. There are good reasons for approaching the book this way. It enables us to focus in on the detail without getting lost in it so that we cannot see the wood for the trees. It also helps us to see how Mark has crafted his Gospel to confront us with crucial points.

Our normal tendency is to take up one small passage such as a healing, saying or parable and divide it up drawing three or four applications from it. However, there is a strong case for seeing how three or four short passages including perhaps a miracle and a couple of parables offer us different perspectives on one primary point. A benefit of this is that the church do not become overloaded with lots of applications to attempt to put into practice in the week ahead.

So when preparing to preach or teach on Mark, I would first of all read the whole book. As mentioned, this is achievable in a single one hour sitting. I'd then focus on the particular passage in question and read it through several times using different Bible translations. I then find it helpful to copy the text either into an editable document such as word or even to print it off. Then with the online tools or some highlighters I start to annotate the passage.

Here are some things to look out for:

1. Identify the types of discourse. When are events being reported? When are fictional stories being used? Is there any poetry? When is speech reported?
2. When looking at narrative -whether fictional or historical identify who the main characters are and how they are represented in the passage
3. Who is talking and what are they saying? Who is silent? Silence can be as important as comment!
4. Does the author simply report events and speech or does he comment and offer evaluation.

With narrative, I then tend to look at three other things. First of all, I look at much space and attention is given to each event. Sometimes you may spot that an event is given what seems like disproportionate space relative to the time it would have taken and to other events. This indicates that the author is either slowing down or speeding up the story to draw our attention to something. Secondly, I look for any unusual incidents that seem to jar with the flow of the text and don't seem to fit nicely. Why are they there? An obvious example would be when Mark introduces himself in the account recounting the young man fleeing from Gethsemane. I also wonder whether the discussion on divorce feels a little unusual as a very specific technical focus on one law. Then there's the point when the Sadducees turn up for a debate when primarily the focus in the Gospels is on the Scribes and Pharisees (similarly the mention of Herodians).

⁷ Remember that the chapter and verse breaks were not in the original text and should not be treated as infallible!

The third thing I do is start to highlight words and phrases which seem to be repeated. It's helpful to use a Bible version like the ESV for this which is a more formal word for word translation than the NIV and NLT. Repeated words and phrases will indicate emphasis. They also show us how passages link. Notice for example the link between the widows who are devoured (Mark 12:40) and the widow's offering (12:42).

As we spot the detail of words and phrases, we will also pick up on the appearance of big theme words and phrases such as "Kingdom of God." and "Cross". Notice too the repetition of "three days" at certain points. We will also identify quotes and allusions to the Old Testament such as "coming on the clouds" and "Son of Man." We are meant to read the story of Jesus in the light of Old Testament fulfilment.

Finally, it is worth comparing the passage with its appearance in other Gospels. Beware the temptation to speak about the other passage instead because it seems to offer more obvious fruit. Rather, if Mark has included certain elements not present in the other passages or excluded other parts then there is intentionality. He wants us to focus in on certain things which may offer a different teaching perspective to Matthew and Luke. Ask why he does this.

Our aim then is to identify the big theme that holds the passage together. What is the primary point that Mark wants to highlight? Try and summarise this in one sentence. And what is the consequence of this? As a result of knowing this thing, how are our lives changed through the grace of the Gospel and in the power of the Holy Spirit? This will provide the primary application we want to share.

6. Overview

a. Prologue 1:1-15 Good News, God's king is coming.

The Gospel begins with the announcement that this is good news about Jesus Christ, or Jesus the Messiah. We join the story at the beginning of his adult ministry. The backdrop is John preparing the way, fulfilling Isaiah 40:3. This indicates eschatological significance because it indicates the full and true end to the exile of God's people. John's baptism in the Jordan then takes on significance. The people entered the land through water, through the Jordan (c.f. Isaiah 43:3). Although living physically in the land, they were not truly free from exile and in God's presence under his rule. Repentance and symbolic re-entering in order to welcome the coming king's rule was necessary.

Jesus is seen joining in with this baptism, identifying with God's people and acting as the obedient son in contrast to disobedient Israel (cf Hosea 11:1). Like Israel he experiences a desert/wilderness exile and testing but unlike Israel remains obedient and without sin. Note that Mark unlike Matthew and Luke does not focus on the temptations

Jesus begins his ministry -like John he calls for repentance. He announces the kingdom is at hand which is in effect the application of Isaiah 40:3

When teaching this section it is helpful to show how the imagery and events fit in with the Old Testament backdrop and the story of God's faithfulness in redeeming and calling a people for himself.

Big Theme there is good news -God's King is here and our right response is repentance.

We may want to focus on three questions here

1. What is Good News?
2. What does true repentance look like?
3. What is God's Kingdom and what does it mean for it to be near/present in our contexts?

b. Part 1 – Ministry in and around Galilee

i. In Galilee

The Call of the Kingdom 1:16-2:17)

We now begin to see what it means for Jesus to preach about the Kingdom and call people to repentance with a series of examples.

- It means calling people to follow him and leave behind other priorities (1:16-20 and 2:13-17)
- It means calling evil spirits out of people. Captives are set free (1:21-28)
- It means healing (1:29-34)
- It means time alone with the Father (1:35)
- It means getting the message out to all (1:36-39)
- It means cleansing (1:40-45)

- It means forgiveness (2:1-12)
- It means reconciliation and restoration as undesirables find a welcome (2:13 -17)

Note the theme of cleanness and uncleanness. This is an important theme from the Old Testament. Being unclean through contact with dead bodies, through certain diseases, through possession and through certain bodily emissions separated you from God's presence and the company of God's people.

Notice there is both personal intimacy here -whether Jesus is alone talking to his Father, calling people by name or healing those within his immediate circle and crowd as Jesus heals and preaches to many.

The theme of the secret kingdom revealed in God's time and way not at the agenda of others is introduced as Jesus forbids demons to speak about him.

Big Theme: The transforming call of the Kingdom/Gospel

Questions to ponder include:

1. What is our response to God's call?
2. What transformation are we seeing in our lives and in the lives of others around?

The Lord of Space and Time (2:18-3:35)

I've always enjoyed Doctor Who, but there was a moment when David Tennant's character wanted me to shout "No" at the screen and that's the moment when he declares himself lord of Space and time. There is only one person who owns that title, The Doctor is just an ordinary alien.

Here we see the Lordship of Jesus first in his control over the Old Testament Laws. As Lord, he is the one that made the rules that govern us and so he can determine their application and purpose. The religious leaders of the day, just like people today had taken God's good laws which were for their benefit and created a heavy burden. Jesus challenges that. The Law is for man's benefit not the other way round.

This is seen as he challenges assumptions about fasting. It is not a time for fasting and morning when he is present but rather for feasting and rejoicing (2:18-22). It also means that he claims authority over the Sabbath, just as King David as God's righteous, anointed ruler could benefit. Jesus is greater than David (2:23-8). Note that the Sabbath theme links us to 3:1-6 as Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Jesus is also linked with David as both kings were pursued by those seeking their lives. There is an incredible irony here that he is accused of being a law-breaker but he uses the Sabbath to give healing and life whilst his enemies use it to seek to kill and destroy.

Jesus' authority is recognised by the enemy as demons cannot deny his identity. It is not just that he is more powerful than them but rather his goodness that gives him authority. He is the Holy One. (3:7-12) It is the Holy One of Israel that he establishes the new kingdom by appointing the 12 as new tribal heads (3:13-19)

Yet Jesus' critics still choose to doubt him. Even his own family question his sanity (3:20-21). The religious leaders accuse him of using Satanic power to cast out demons. Jesus points to the stupidity of this. It would mean Satan was engaged in civil war. Rather a greater king and a greater kingdom has come. Not only are their claims stupid but they are offensive to the point of blasphemy. The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is to resist his work and harden your heart by begin so twisted in your

conscience that you confuse good with evil. It is this that makes it unforgiveable because you refuse the very means of grace offered to you (3:22-30).⁸

Jesus is establishing a kingdom and a family. There is intimacy here and he draws us into royalty! His family is not about flesh and blood relations but about the work of the Holy Spirit.

Big Theme: The authority of Jesus challenges our petty legalism

Questions to consider

1. What does it mean to be a spiritual mother/brother/sister?
2. Some people may benefit from a closer look at what the unforgivable sin is

God's Word at work bringing growth (4: 1-34)

We now have a cluster of parables about God's kingdom with farming imagery dominating. The most famous of these is the parable of the Sower (or perhaps more accurately 'soils') where seed lands on different types of ground bringing different outcomes. There are things that prevent seed from taking root, growing and bearing fruit reflecting Satanic opposition and distraction, persecution and the daily cares of life. However, in the right soil there is growth just as God's Word in our lives produces fruitfulness (4:1-20).

Parables are used because now is not yet the stage for full revelation (4:10-12). God's kingdom is revealed to some -those who are hungry, those who have faith but hidden from others, there is judgement happening against the proud and hard hearted too.⁹ However, revelation is unavoidable – the truth will come out completely (4:21-25). God's kingdom is growing even though it may seem small and fragile to start with (4:26-34).

Big Theme: The revelation of God's Word brings a response. The response we are looking for is life changing fruitfulness and growth

Questions to think about

1. Digging deeper into the Isaiah 6 reference and the function of parables as a filter. Why are some excluded and judged by the same words that bring hope and welcome to others?
2. What does mean in terms of the work of God's Word in our own lives in terms of spiritual growth? Are we bearing fruit?
3. What does this mean in terms of our expectations of kingdom growth in response to Gospel proclamation?

Defeated enemies 4:35-5:43

We now encounter a series of incredible miracles and signs which demonstrate Jesus' power over the forces of evil and death. First, we see Jesus as Lord over his creation. Jesus travels across Galilee with his disciples. He is asleep in the boat as a storm brews. There are echoes of Jonah's flight to Tarshish here. The disciples are terrified but Jesus calms the storm with a word. Just as creation came into being through God's Word, so Christ, the Word of God can bring order back to creation with a word.

⁸ It is perhaps helpful to address the question "could I commit the unforgivable sin." I usually respond by saying that the very fact you ask the question indicates a tender conscience rather than one that is hardened against God.

⁹ A prophetic function -c.f. Isaiah 6 quoted in verse 12.

I think there are clues here that this is not just about his sovereignty over nature though. First, this storm seems extraordinary, it produces fear in seasoned sailors. Secondly, the direct rebuke. Thirdly, there is a theme through the Bible of creation out of nothing, order out of chaos and especially the waters in their place. The Flood speaks of a return to chaos, of de-creation and judgement. Here Jesus rebukes forces of chaos and disorder.

On the other side of the lake, Jesus meets a man possessed by many demons who have tortured his mind and driven him out of the community to the tombs – a place of death. Jesus casts out the demons (5:1-20). They seek refuge in a herd of pigs and these are driven into the waters. Again, we see chaos and watery death. This gives us a hint as to who those forces of chaos are! The man however is restored to an ordered and peaceful life. He begins to speak for Jesus in the Decapolis -a group of ten towns in the region with a more Greek/Gentile culture.

Finally, we have the healing of a woman with a discharge of blood and the raising of Jairus' daughter. Notice too the theme of uncleanness coming through: unclean spirits, graves, pigs, discharge, bodies. Uncleanness, disorder, and death are linked. Jesus has authority over all of these. He is the one who will defeat Satan and defeat death (5:21-43).

Big Theme: The authority of Jesus over the defeated enemies of darkness and death

Questions to consider

1. The reality of evil including Satan and demons. Implications for spiritual warfare
2. Do we let death have the last word in our lives?

ii. Withdrawal from Galilee

What kind of king do you want (Mark 6)

If Mark's Gospel is about the good news of the imminent kingdom, then this raises the question about the type of king who is coming and whether this is the king that people want. Here in Chapter 6:1-6 we see that many people reject Jesus, he is not the king they want. In his home town of Nazareth, he is rejected, they see him as just Joseph the carpenter's son. They dismiss him. Familiarity breeds contempt!

He commissions and sends out the twelve as his ambassadors -doing the same things they've seen him do. They will be received in some places but rejected in others. They are to move on when rejected (6:7-13)

We are then presented with two kingly banquets. At the first, Herod, the alternative king is the centre of attention. The party is all about him. It is a banquet of death as it results in the murder of John the Baptist. A corpse is served up (6:14-29).

The other banquet has Jesus at the centre and his concern is to provide for the needs of others with the miraculous multiplication of fish and bread. It is a banquet of life as Jesus the bread of life feeds those gathered. We cannot help but observe that where Herod served up John's body, Jesus invites us to feed on himself. Of course, the murder of John is also a rejection of God and his true king Jesus (30-34).

The disciples cross the lake again and again they are struggling with the elements against the wind. This perhaps is a visual lesson of what life without Jesus means. Will they choose to throw their lot in completely with him? He comes to them walking on the water. His arrival in the boat brings an end

to the wind's resistance. He tells them not to be afraid but they remain fearful and confused. Mark links this to a lack of faith with hard hearts and a lack of understanding. They don't grasp the significance of the feeding of the 5000.

On the other side, he is welcomed and received. They look to him for healing.

Big Theme: Jesus is the life bringing king. However, not everyone wants this king. We choose between life and death, blessing and curse

Questions to consider

1. What does it mean for you and I to choose or reject Jesus?
2. To what extent is the commissioning of the 12 unique and to what extent does it offer a model/example for evangelism?
3. How does Jesus feeding the 5000 echo the feeding of the people in the wilderness?

Defiled (Mark 7)

Jesus is challenged by about his disciples' failure to observe the ritual/ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. Hand washing prior to meals was required not for hygiene reasons or to slow down a pandemic but to represent symbolically the need to be spiritually clean.

Jesus' response is that it isn't the external things that matter. Their legalistic rule following is mere lip service. God is concerned with the heart. In fact, they deliberately twist and abuse Scripture/God's Law in order to find ways to disobey God on what really matters (7:1-13).

Food doesn't affect the heart -it gets digested and passes through. Defilement is caused not by outside things coming in but works from the inside out. The problem is with corrupted, sinful hearts (7:14-23)

We can then see how the next two miracles relate to this. First, Jesus meets a woman who is a Gentile -this would mean she was considered unclean. She didn't meet external requirements. Her family are being oppressed by an unclean spirit. Their conversation brings out what really matters. Some people think Jesus is rejecting her on racial lines but this would suggest fallibility on his part. I believe he is deliberately, with clear humour drawing out a point. She may be a Gentile on the outside but from the inside comes faith. This brings healing to her household (7:24-30)

Jesus then heals a man who is deaf. Again, outer health defects do not have anything to say about the condition of the heart (7:31-37)

Big Theme – It's the State of the heart that matters

Questions for consideration

1. The conversation between Jesus and the Gentile woman is worth digging into.
2. What is the condition of our hearts? Do we ever fall into the trap of paying lip service only?

Halfway there? (Mark 8:1-9:1)

We are in effect at the mid-point of the Gospel here. The challenge then is whether or not people are beginning to see, hear and understand the truth about who Jesus is. In case the disciples have not learnt yet, Jesus offers a reprise of the miraculous feeding -this time with 4000 men (8:1-10). Even still this isn't enough for the Pharisees who continue to demand signs (8:11-13).

Jesus likens the hard-hearted legalistic doubt of the Pharisees to leaven which contaminates and influences the whole batch of dough just as their hardness influenced the whole people. The disciples are bewildered and think Jesus is talking about ordinary bread. He draws out the lesson of the two feedings by encouraging them to consider the amount left over. Twelve and seven are symbolic numbers, the first represents God's people (12 tribes) the second completeness (7 days of the week with God resting at the completion of creation). There is more than enough provision, protection, love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness for God's people who find perfect fulness in Christ (8:14-21).

They meet a man who is blind. Jesus heals him but in two stages. At the first stage he is able to see a little but imperfectly. Given Jesus' ability to heal perfectly we should see this as deliberate. The healing is an enacted parable showing how the disciples are beginning to see Jesus for who he is but imperfectly (8:22-26).

This is demonstrated in Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ. He is beginning to see who Jesus is. However, his attempt to correct Jesus and refusal to accept that Jesus' kingdom will come by the way of the Cross shows that he hasn't yet fully got it (8:27-9:1).

It is in this context that Jesus insists that following him means taking up our your Cross. He also sets out a promise/prophecy that there were those among the Crowd who would witness the powerful inauguration of his kingdom.

Big Theme: What stops us from seeing Jesus for who he is?

Questions to consider

1. If asked "who do you say I am" by Jesus how would we answer?
2. What does it mean to call Jesus "Christ"?
3. Why did the disciples find it so hard to understand and accept Jesus' teaching about the cross?
4. What does Jesus mean when he talks about some seeing his kingdom come in power?

Foretastes of glory (9:2-50)

Jesus has promised that at least some of the disciples will see the glory and power of his coming kingdom. This, in context, is pointing to his death and resurrection. However, as that day approaches there seem to be further opportunities for them to see even clearer glimpses of what that will look like.

First of all, there is the Transfiguration. Jesus takes a small group, his inner circle of disciples up a mountain. There they witness Jesus meeting with two Old Testament figures Moses and Elijah. For a moment the veil is removed and they see his radiant glory. Jesus is the fulfilment of Law (Moses) and Prophets (Elijah). Peter wants to capture the moment permanently but this is to miss the point. Jesus as fulfilment is greater than these. The job of the Law and Prophets is to point to Christ. Jesus is the Father's beloved son. The Father takes pleasure and delight in him.

On the way down the mountain, they are greeted by a commotion. The other disciples have attempted and failed to cast out a demon. Jesus explains that they needed prayer (and in some manuscripts, fasting) for this kind. It is possible that he is referring to a particular kind of demon or simply to demon kind in general. If the latter, then the point is not that extra skills were needed but that they had forgotten their dependence upon God for these things and attempted the exorcism in their own strength. There are echoes here of the commotion at the foot of Sinai when Moses returned from receiving the Law.

In verse 30-33 we see the second of Jesus' direction markers as we transition towards Jerusalem and he reminds them of his impending death and resurrection. This points to where they will see his kingdom come in power.

Lack of understanding leads to a focus on their own striving for power as they compete and argue about who will be greatest. This leads Jesus to insist that they must follow his path of humbling themselves. If they want to be among the great then they must be first among the least. The kingdom belongs to those who are like children. The point being that children were of lower status and had no power in either Jewish or Roman culture (9:33-37).

Similarly, there is competition to protect the brand as they ask about someone using Jesus' name to cast out demons. That the person acts in Jesus' name shows that they are seeking to follow Christ even if not part of a specific organisation/group. Power and gifting is not restricted within the confines of the twelve. Jesus says that this person is not seeking to oppose them and so he is for them (9:38-41).

Finally, we see how important the kingdom is. It is not so much about risking life and limb as risking limb for life. There is a seriousness to the things that cause stumbling. If I cause another to stumble - especially someone vulnerable/weaker/younger in faith then that is a matter of serious judgement. If anything about my life, values, priorities causes me to stumble then I should be ready to abandon it (9:42-50).

Big Theme: The focus is on the power and glory of God's kingdom revealed in Christ's death and resurrection. Paul talks about counting everything else loss for this.

Questions to consider

1. In what ways can we end up being like Peter, trying to freeze frame something for sentimentality and missing what God is saying and doing?
2. Who are the little ones among us? What does it mean to be like a child?
3. How might we become focused on protecting the brand?
4. What are the things that cause us to stumble?

Removing power barriers (ch10)

We are travelling with Jesus to Jerusalem to the Temple and towards the time of Jesus's death and resurrection. On route Jesus will encounter those who seek to block and oppose him. We will also see the barriers that others face.

First, we see Jesus confronted by the religious leaders seeking to test him. We know from all the Gospels that there were persistent efforts to trap and test him. Here they try to catch him out by getting him to take sides in a rift on divorce. Jesus instead takes them through the Law to their own hearts. The issue is not about certificates and certainly not about men being able to hold power over women and treat them as property. God calls us away from such legalism to true loving faithfulness that reflects God's love and faithfulness to us.¹⁰

We then return to the theme of who the kingdom is open to. Jesus has in the last chapter said that it belongs to those who become as little children but here we see barriers up against listel ones as

¹⁰ This is likely to raise more detailed questions about teaching on divorce and marriage. See [divorce-and-remarriage-.pdf \(wordpress.com\)](#) for a more detailed study.

parents try to bring their kids to Jesus for blessing. Jesus insists that there must be no barriers in their way.

A man comes to ask Jesus about how we can receive eternal life and enter the Kingdom. Jesus has compassion on him. He talks about the commandments which the man claims to have kept. Jesus tells him to sell all and give to the poor. His wealth was a barrier. Although he believed he had kept the commandments he had an idol.

James and John are still arguing about greatness in the kingdom. They want the seats of power either side of Jesus in the kingdom. Rivalry and desire for status and power forms another barrier. Jesus calls on them to serve first.

As they pass through Jericho, they meet a blind man. Bartimaeus is a surname (Son of Timaeus), it seems this man doesn't have a first name, such is his forgotten status. He is a nobody. Jesus heals him and he follows Jesus, this means he accompanies him on his pilgrimage into Jerusalem and to the Temple. Those with severe disabilities were excluded from the Temple but this barrier is removed for Bartimaeus.

Big Theme: The Gospel removes all barriers and strips away pride and power.

Questions to consider

1. What barriers has the Gospel removed for us?
2. Are there barriers that we put in the way of others?
3. How does the Gospel challenge our approach to power and status?

Grand Entry (Mark 11)

In Mark 11 we see Jesus arrive in Jerusalem at the head of the pilgrim procession ready for the Passover Festival. He arrives on a donkey. The important thing here is not so much lowliness, OT kings did ride on donkeys and mules but more about the nature of his arrival, he comes in peace as the rightful king not on a war horse to conquer by force. This is the one who John told the people to make the way ready for. Many recognise the significance and sing praises hailing him as David's descendent (11:1-11).

Jesus goes immediately to the Temple where he drives out the money changers (11:15-19). Jesus also curses a fig tree for lack of fruit. Although the tree itself was not in season, this symbolised Israel's fruitlessness (11:12-14 & 20-25).

Jesus is challenged in the Temple but his authority cannot be denied (11:26-33)

Big Theme: Jesus is the true King who has come to put things right

Questions to consider

1. The significance of the fruit tree being cursed
2. What would Jesus make of our places of worship?

Taking on the religious guardians (Mark 12)

Jesus' opponents were looking for an excuse to have Jesus arrested. Here in his last week, Mark puts the focus on their attempts to trap him. I guess that in a sense 12:1-12 forms a kind of invitation to "bring it on." Jesus tells a parable which might also be seen as a figurative retelling of

the history of Israel. The Vineyard represents the kingdom of Israel/Kingdom of God's people. The tenants represent the leaders of Israel/The Jews, especially the religious leaders and the servants are the prophets. Jesus is the Son who comes from the Father, he too will be rejected and killed leading to the judgement of the wicked tenants (religious leaders).

Different groups and factions among the leadership take turns to try and trap Jesus. Mentioned here

- The Pharisees: a populist sect who believed that if the people purified themselves then God would come to rescue them from Rome and establish the true King.
- The Herodians: those who sought to align politically with King Herod and be implication with the Romans.
- The Sadducees: stronger among the ruling classes/Sanhedrin which also tended towards compromise with the occupiers. The Sadducees did not accept all of the writings and prophecies as Scripture and did not believe in a physical resurrection of the dead.

Not mentioned are The Essenes -a monastic sect that saw the Jerusalem leadership as corrupt and so set up their own rival Temple in the desert at Qumran. Additionally, there were various Zealot groups seeking to overthrow the Romans by political revolution and violence.

The Pharisees and Herodians make for a peculiar alliance therefore when they seek to trap Jesus by getting him to choose between Israel/Yahweh and Rome. In response to their question about taxes he asks to see a coin. They bring him one. By getting them to say whose head is on the inscription he is getting them to recognise that they have already placed themselves under Caesar's rule and influence. The challenge to give to God what belongs to him is a reminder that we in fact owe everything to Him (12:13-17).

The Sadducees come with a riddle based on the law of Levirate marriage from Deuteronomy. If a wife was widowed, then the younger brother was required to take her husband's place to ensure continuation of the family line. So, what if in turn a series of brothers die? Who is the woman's husband after the resurrection? Well, this is a bit of a fallacy anyway because the point of the law is that the Levirate acts in place of the original husband to continue his line. Further, Jesus points that marriage is for life now, after the resurrection it is not needed because we are together as the bride of Christ. However, of course, they aren't really interested in a true answer. They are trying to get Jesus to say something silly, to look foolish. They don't believe in resurrection. Jesus gets to the real heart of the matter -they don't really believe in God, his word and the power of his word (12:18-27).

Another person challenges with a question about prioritising Laws. It seems he is at the same time genuinely seeking because Jesus says that he is close to the kingdom. Jesus responds that the greatest commandment is to love God whole heartedly because this sums up the purpose of the Law (12:28-34).

Jesus challenges them back with a question about the ancestry of the Christ/Messiah. How can he be a descendent of David if he is greater? Of course, it is only because he is fully God as well as fully man that this can be true (12:35-37).

Jesus warns that the religious leaders are dangerous. They are abusers of power and he describes them as "devouring widows." It seems that they found ways to take advantage of the vulnerable, presumably looking to them for financial support. So, it is fascinating that Mark places in contrast with the grasping scribes a poor vulnerable widow who gives everything she has as worship to God (12:38-40).

It's sometimes suggested that Jesus is skilfully ducking the traps and not getting drawn in. However, remember that Jesus knew that his hour had come. Look closely and you will see that rather than finding a way to avoid the answers, Jesus is ready to be far more provocative than even the original questioners assumed.

Big Theme: The difference between the Gospel and legalistic religion

Questions to consider:

1. Are there people/groups of people that represent the wicked tenants in today's culture and/or the church?
2. How does Jesus' response to the Sadducees affect our approach to teaching on and pastoral care for people in terms of marriage and singleness?
3. Who would we be most identifiable with: the scribes or the widow?

Coming Judgement (Mark 13)

The Temple was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Initially a fairly simple design had replaced Solomon's temple and Ezra records the disappointment of the people at this. However, by Jesus' day, the second temple had been remodelled and extended greatly by Herod the Great who hoped to win favour with the Jews. The disciples are mesmerised by its grandeur but Jesus tells them not to be taken in. This building will soon fall. Here he prophesies the events of AD70 when a rebellion will be crushed and Jerusalem with its temple destroyed. The only remaining traces being the Western or Wailing Wall.

Such an event seems impossible to conceive of for the disciples. It sounds earth shattering and world ending. They associate it with the end of the ages. Jesus however tells them that this and other troubling events are not in and of themselves signs of the actual end but rather "birth pangs" or the beginning. For this reason we talk about the entire period between Jesus' first coming and his second coming as The Last Days."

Jesus focus here seems to be primarily on the events around the destruction of Jerusalem. He associates them with Daniel's prophecy of an "abomination of desolation" -something so disgraceful and shameful that it will deeply trouble God's people. At the same time, this event points us to Jesus' return, associated with further imagery from Daniel where the Son of Man comes on the clouds.

Jesus says that these are things that the present generation will see happen. It is possible that this either refers to the events of AD70, in which case it was in that generation's time. However, the word 'generation' may also refer to God's people -the church as a generation together in which case Jesus is saying that "this generation, the church, will see his return.

Events like the fall of Jerusalem are foretastes of judgement and evidence of creation's frustration. They point to the nearness of Christ, not in the sense that we can timetable his return in terms of weeks, months or years but that we know he could return at any moment. The exact date is not revealed and so we should not try to second guess it.

Big Theme: Readiness: Are we ready for what God will do?

Questions to consider

1. If Jesus were to return today would we be ready?
2. Just as people in Jesus' day put false trust in the Temple where can we misplace our trust?
3. How should we respond to "world ending/earth shattering" events in our time?¹¹

Betrayed, Denied, Accused (Mark 14)

We are now reaching the culmination of the Gospel. Jesus is about to be betrayed and handed over to death. The leaders are hesitant, not wanting to cause a disturbance during the festival, and yet the focus on Passover is exactly the time when God has planned these events to come to pass (14:1-2)

It seems that Jesus and his disciples spent their days in Jerusalem during the festival but had lodgings out of town either camping in Gethsemane or heading back to Bethany and the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. It's there that Jesus is anointed. This is seen as wasteful by his disciples but Jesus says that this is an anointing for his burial (14:3-9). Judas, who was one of those critical is now provoked to betray Jesus (14:10-11).

Jesus eats the Passover meal with his disciples and there refocuses the imagery of the meal from God's salvation in rescuing the Israelites from Egypt to the greater salvation coming for all through his death and resurrection. The bread and the cup represent his body and blood given on our behalf (14:12-25).

The disciples, especially Peter make brave promises but when the time comes, they will desert him (14:26-31). They cannot even stay awake as he experiences trial and testing, wrestling in prayer in the Garden (14:32-42). Jesus is tested but remains obedient, he submits his will to the Father. Remember how in the earlier chapters we have seen how Jesus retraces Israel's journey of Exodus and testing but obediently. Here we see his obedience right to the end. We sometimes talk about "imputed righteousness". Jesus as the obedient son is righteous. We receive his righteousness. God looks at us as having lived completely obedient to his law. This means that justification/imputed righteousness are the other side of the coin to penal substitution -that Jesus' death as represented by the last supper was in our place and on our behalf.

Jesus is betrayed and deserted (14:43-52), arrested and put on trial by the Sanhedrin where he is subject to false accusation. (14:53-65).¹² Peter denies him (14:66-72).

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| Big Theme: Jesus suffers on our behalf |
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Questions to consider

1. In what ways does Jesus' experience here offer hope to us when we experience rejection, betrayal, desertion and false accusation?
2. Based on this passage how can we best sum up what the good news of the Gospel is?

Crucified (Mark 15)

Jesus is handed over to Pilate because the Jewish leaders don't have the authority to order his execution. Given their hesitancy around a public showdown with Jesus themselves, it also neatly

¹¹ For more see: [Signs of the Times \(Mark 13\) – Preaching in a crisis – Faithroots](#) and [The end of a world – Faithroots](#)

¹² The young man who fled was probably Mark himself – indicating that he has been an eye witness to these events. This is an occasion where we need to stop and ask why such a small, seemingly insignificant detail is included.

hands the problem over to the Romans. Note the cowardice of a night trial and then passing the issue so that they don't get their hands dirty. What it also does is draw all humanity into complicity. It wasn't the Jews who killed the Christ contra antisemitic tropes, all peoples are culpable.

A choice is offered. Will the people have Jesus released or Barabbas? Their choice is also once again about the type of king and saviour they want, a zealot engaged in low level armed disruption or the true saviour who brings reconciliation with God? They choose the former. Jesus is crucified as "King of the Jews." For Pilate this is about Roman victory. Yet it is as king that Jesus brings salvation and victory. He is placed with sinners, with rebels. He is mocked by Jews and Gentiles alike. But he is also recognised by a Roman Gentile as "The Son of God."

He is watched by the women, and Joseph a member of the Sanhedrin steps forward bravely to request the body for burial. The tomb is secured and guarded making grave robbery impossible.

Big Theme: Jesus died for us and because of us

Questions to consider

1. What is it that causes the Roman officer to recognise Jesus as Son of God?
2. What are the implications of saying that all humanity is culpable in his death?

Risen (Mark 16:1-8)

Mark gives the briefest of details as we come to the empty tomb. All of the other Gospel writers provide more detail which fleshes out our understanding of Resurrection Sunday. The crucial facts are given though. It's the women who are first to the tomb. They find it empty and are greeted by a man in white robes (angel). He tells them that Jesus is risen. He sends them to tell the others. They struggle with emotions that include fear, trembling and astonishment. Jesus will meet the disciples in Galilee. He goes ahead of them

Big Theme: Jesus has dealt with the problem of sin and defeated death. He is risen.

Questions to Consider

1. In what way does/should our own response to the empty tomb reflect/echo that of the women?
2. What attention and significance do we give to the message to Peter that Christ is going ahead of them to Galilee

7. Conclusion

Mark's Gospel is foundational to our understanding of what the good news is about Jesus, his life, death and resurrection. This is in many respects a stripped back account which enables us to home in on the crucial details. We learn here what it means to live in the shadow of the Cross, to choose a way of suffering and service and to know, worship and depend on the true King as we see his kingdom come in our lives.

Mark is therefore a fantastic introduction to Christian faith and so plays an important part in evangelism and basic discipleship. However, there is also much here for established and mature believers as we remember that our who life is lived in light of the Gospel.