

# Mark

A COMMENTARY BY

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## Introductory Material

### *Introduction*

For the first few centuries of the church, Mark's Gospel was treated as the least important of the Four Gospels. This is perhaps not surprising, since it is the shortest and since about ninety percent of its content can be found in either Matthew or Luke. Mark's Gospel is also in various ways the most difficult of the Gospels. Its Greek style is rough and awkward at times. Theologically, it has a number of difficult passages. Jesus seems to have difficulty healing people ([Mark 6:5; 7:31–37](#)), uses strange cures ([Mark 7:33; 8:23](#)), and demonstrates strong human emotions ([Mark 1:41; 3:5; 9:19; 14:33–34](#)). There are a number of strange episodes, such as the young man who flees naked when Jesus is arrested ([Mark 14:51–52](#)). Most significantly, in our earliest manuscripts, the Gospel ends in a strange way, with the fear and silence of the women who discover the empty tomb, and with no resurrection appearances. All these likely contributed to the neglect of the Gospel.

This situation changed, however, with the introduction of critical methodologies during the 19th and 20th centuries. With the rise of Source Criticism, Mark came to be viewed as the earliest gospel, and so the closest to the actual events. This made it the topic of intense study in the so-called “quests for the historical Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> Many scholars came to believe that in Mark we have the least embellished and most historical portrait of Jesus.

In addition to this historical interest, the rise of narrative criticism in the 1980s and 90s resulted in a flourishing of Markan studies.<sup>2</sup> Mark's is the most dramatic of the Gospels. The author is a master storyteller, with a fast-paced, lively style and a multitude of colorful details.

### *What Are the Literary Features of Mark?*

*A Gospel of Action.* Mark's is a gospel more of actions than of words. Although Mark frequently refers to Jesus as a teacher, he records less of Jesus's actual teaching than the other gospels, and proportionally more miracles. Mark is fond of the Greek word *euthus*, often translated "immediately." This propels the narrative forward in a fast-paced style.

*Intercalation.* Mark is also fond of a literary feature known as intercalation, or sandwiching. In intercalation, one episode begins and is then interrupted by another, finally returning to the first. The two episodes mutually interpret one another.

*Triads.* Another literary feature common in Mark's Gospel is groups of threes, or triads. There are three boat scenes, three passion predictions, three times Jesus discovers the disciples sleeping in Gethsemane, and three times Peter denies Jesus. These triads are often related to the failure of the disciples, a major theme in Mark's Gospel.

*The Messianic Secret.* One of the most puzzling themes of Mark's Gospel is a secrecy motif. Jesus often silences demons when they cry out who he is (Mark 1:25, 34; 3:12); he tells those he heals not to tell anyone about it (Mark 1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26); and when Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus commands the disciples not to tell anyone (Mark 8:30; cf. 9:9). What is going on here? There have been various attempts to explain this motif. The most famous is that of William Wrede, who over a century ago claimed that the messianic secret was a literary device used by Mark to explain away Jesus's unmessianic life.<sup>3</sup> According to Wrede, Jesus never actually claimed to be the Messiah, so Mark used this secrecy motif to assert that Jesus *was* the Messiah, but that he kept this a secret during his life. Wrede's foundational assertion that Mark wrote primarily for theological rather than historical reasons has had a profound impact on biblical scholarship, setting the tone for much of liberal scholarship that followed. His actual explanation for the messianic secret, however, has not fared so well. One key problem with it is that on several occasions the secret is broken (Mark 1:44–45; 7:36–37). People ignore Jesus's command and news about him spreads and spreads. The Markan theme of *popularity* dwarfs that of secrecy (see Mark 1:28, 33–34, 37; 2:1–2, 4, 13; 3:7–9, 20; 4:1, 36; 5:21, 24, 30–32; 6:14–15, 31–34; 7:24, 36–37; 8:1–3; 9:14–15, 30; 10:1, 13). A more likely explanation for the motif is that Jesus wants to define his messiahship on his own terms. While the people are looking for a conquering Messiah, who will defeat the Romans and establish Israel sovereignty, Jesus's messianic role is to suffer and die as an atoning sacrifice for sins (Mark 10:45). Jesus commands silence and tries to discourage popular acclaim until he can teach his disciples the true suffering role of the Messiah—a central theme of the second half of Mark's Gospel (Mark 8:31–32; 9:31; 10:32–33).

### ***Who Wrote the Gospel according to Mark?***

So who was the author of this powerful gospel? From its earliest days, the name associated with it was Mark, and the title *Kata Markon*, “according to Mark,” appears in our earliest manuscripts.<sup>4</sup> This attribution is likely accurate for two reasons. First, Mark is a rather obscure character in the NT. It seems unlikely that the church would have attributed a gospel to him unless he actually wrote it. Second, we have early attribution of Markan authorship by the church father Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, in the second century AD. The church historian Eusebius quotes Papias, who himself is citing “the elder” (likely John the apostle): “Mark became Peter’s interpreter and wrote down accurately, but not in order, all that he remembered of the things said and done by the Lord.”<sup>5</sup> This early attribution both that Mark wrote the gospel, and that he is writing Peter’s recollection of even

So who was this Mark? The only viable candidate in the NT is John Mark. We first hear of Mark in [Acts 12:12](#), where we learn that his mother Mary owned a house in Jerusalem where the church met. Mark, who was the cousin of Barnabas ([Col 4:10](#)), went with Paul and Barnabas as an “assistant” or “helper” on their first missionary journey to Cyprus and Galatia ([Acts 12:25; 13:5](#)). Midway into this mission, Luke reports that Mark returned to Jerusalem ([Acts 13:13](#)). Paul viewed this departure as desertion and so, when he and Barnabas planned a second trip to Galatia, Paul refused to take Mark. When they could not agree, Barnabas took Mark and returned to Cyprus, while Paul chose a new associate, Silas, and returned to Galatia ([Acts 15:37–39](#)).

Mark’s failure, though painful, was temporary and he was later reconciled with Paul. Paul refers to him positively as his associate in [Philemon 24](#) and [Colossians 4:10](#). Then, near the end of his life, Paul tells Timothy to bring Mark with him to Rome, since Mark is useful in ministry ([2Tim 4:11](#)). We also know that Mark worked with the Apostle Peter in Rome. We learn this both from early church tradition (see Papias cited above) and also from [1 Peter 5:13](#), where Peter refers to Mark as “my son” and sends greetings from the church in “Babylon,” likely a cryptic reference to Rome (see [Rev 17:1–6, 9, 18](#)).

### ***When and Where Was Mark’s Gospel Written?***

The Gospel itself does not identify its provenance. While some have suggested Egypt,<sup>6</sup> Galilee<sup>7</sup> or Syria,<sup>8</sup> the evidence noted above points most likely to Rome. Mark’s strong theme of persecution fits well with a Roman setting. In AD 64 a fire broke out in Rome and burned much of the city. There were suspicions that the emperor Nero’s soldiers had started the fire or at least encouraged it to spread. Nero’s goal, it was rumored, was to claim back land for his own palace. In order to divert suspicion, Nero blamed the Christians for the fire and instigated a horrific persecution against them. Tradition tells us that both Peter and Paul were martyred during this period. It is not unlikely that Mark wrote his Gospel from Rome in the context of this persecution. Possible evidence of this is the cryptic reference, “let the reader understand” ([Mark 13:14](#)), in the midst of the Olivet Discourse, which may indicate that the Jewish revolt was beginning (AD 66) at the time of Mark’s writing.

### ***Purpose***

Mark's purpose in writing is likely threefold: (1) To preserve the gospel tradition in written form as the original apostles began to pass from the scene. (2) To confirm that, despite his crucifixion as a criminal, Jesus was indeed the mighty Messiah and Son of God. (3) To call Christ-followers to faithfulness and perseverance in the face of suffering and persecution.

### ***Key Verse***

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

— Mark 10:45, CSB

### ***Outline***

Mark's structure or plot line highlights two key aspects of his Christology. The first half of the Gospel focuses on Jesus as the mighty Messiah and Son of God. Jesus performs powerful actions that demonstrate his authority as the Messiah. This theme climaxes in Mark 8:29, as Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah. At that point, for the first time Jesus predicts his coming suffering and death. The second half of the book (Mark 8:31–15:47) then focuses on the journey to the cross. Mark's point is that Jesus is indeed the mighty Messiah and Son of God, but he fulfills the messianic role in a unique and surprising way: by suffering as an atoning sacrifice for sins (Mark 10:45). The whole of the Gospel, then, becomes a call to discipleship. As Christ-followers, we must be willing to take up our own cross and follow him.

## **Prologue (1:1–13)**

- A. Introduction (1:1)
- B. John the Baptist Prepares the Way (1:2–8)
- C. The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus (1:9–13)

## **Part I: The Authority of the Messiah (1:14–8:26)**

- A. The Kingdom Authority of the Messiah (1:14–3:6)
- B. The Disciple-Family of the Messiah and those “Outside” (3:7–6:6a)
- C. The Expanding Mission of the Messiah (6:6b–8:26)

## **Part II: The Suffering Way of the Messiah (8:27–15:47)**

- A. Revelation of the Messiah's Suffering (8:27–10:52)
- B. The Messiah Confronts Jerusalem (11:1–13:37)

## C. The Passion of the Messiah in Jerusalem (14:1–15:47)

### Epilogue: The Resurrection Announced (16:1–8)

## Prologue (1:1–13)

While Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with accounts of the birth of Jesus, Mark begins with the preaching of John the Baptist and the public ministry of Jesus. Jesus hits the ground running, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God, calling disciples, healing the sick, casting out demons. The key word is “authority.” Jesus does all these acts with authority, demonstrating that he is the mighty Messiah and Son of God.

### **Introduction (1:1–8)**

**1:1** The Gospel begins with a statement of Jesus’s identity: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The word “gospel” (*euangelion*) means “good news.” The Greek term had a rich history in the Greco-Roman world, where it was used of joyful announcements, such as a victory in battle or the birth of a king. A famous inscription celebrating the birthday of the Roman emperor Augustus reads, “good news (*euangelia*) to the world!”<sup>10</sup> An even more important background comes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, where *euangelion* is used of the arrival of God’s end-time salvation. Isaiah 52:7 reads, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the herald who proclaims peace, who brings news of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’”

The content of this good news is Jesus *the Messiah*. The word translated Messiah is *christos*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew *Mashiach*, meaning “anointed one.” The term was used especially of Israel’s king, who was anointed with oil at his coronation, symbolizing his legitimate rule as God’s vice-regent. Between the period of the OT and the NT, the term came to refer to God’s end-time king from the line of David who would establish God’s kingdom and would reign over it with justice and righteousness. Mark announces that this day has arrived.

The phrase “Son of God” is textually debated, since some of our earliest manuscripts do not contain this phrase. Yet Jesus’s divine Sonship is an important theme throughout Mark. So whether it was originally in this first line or not, it is worth commenting on here. The phrase can refer to essential deity, but it also has a history of use for God’s adopted children. Israel is identified as God’s son, since God gave birth to the nation by bringing them out of slavery in Egypt. The king of Israel was also called God’s “son,” because he acted as God’s vice-regent to establish God’s righteous reign. When used of Jesus, the term has both divine and royal (messianic) connotations.

So what does it mean that this is the “beginning of the Gospel”? Some scholars consider the phrase to be functioning as a title of the book: Mark’s whole Gospel describes the beginning of God’s end-time salvation. Others take the phrase as referring to the events that introduce the Gospel. This could include only John the Baptist’s ministry (1:1–8), Jesus’s preparation for ministry (1:1–13), or up to Jesus’s announcement of the kingdom of God (1:1–15).

**1:2–3** Whatever the beginning is, Mark’s primary point is that Jesus’s ministry fulfills Scripture. These events, Mark says, occurred “as it is written in Isaiah the prophet.”<sup>11</sup> The quotation that follows speaks of “a voice” crying out to “Prepare the way for the Lord.” The “voice” is John the Baptist and the “Lord” is clearly Jesus. Whereas the OT text says, “make straight paths for *our God*,” Mark has “make *his* paths straight,” with the antecedent “the Lord” (= Jesus).

**1:4–5** John appears “in the wilderness,” referring to the Judean desert. The wilderness plays an important role in Israel’s history. It was the place of God’s deliverance in the Exodus and then a place of testing for Israel. There was a strong tradition in Judaism, drawn from Isaiah 40, that God’s deliverance would come from the desert.

John’s message is “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” which probably means a baptism that symbolizes and expresses a person’s repentance—the turning away from sin and turning back to God.

**1:6–8** John’s clothing, a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt, recalls the prophet Elijah (2Kgs 1:8). John’s diet—locusts and wild honey—represents living off the land. As elsewhere in the Gospel tradition, John identifies himself as the forerunner of the Messiah. The one who will come after him is greater than him. Although John baptizes with water, the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit. John is here referring to a great outpouring of the eschatological Spirit predicted by the prophets (Isaiah 44:3; Ezek 36:26–27; Joel 2:28), a prophecy that was (at least partially) fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–21).

### ***The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus (1:9–13)***

**1:9–11** The baptism and temptation represent Jesus’s preparation for ministry. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark shows little interest in Jesus’s origin through genealogies or birth narratives. He instead demonstrates Jesus’s credentials as Messiah through his authority.

Mark notes that Jesus came from his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. The church debated why Jesus submitted to John's baptism. The likely reason was to affirm John's ministry and to identify with the people of God. As Jesus emerges from the water, heaven is "torn open" and the Spirit descends like a dove. The heavens being "torn" is an unusual image, but clearly indicates a theophany, a revelation of God. The only other time this Greek word is used in Mark is at the crucifixion, when the curtain of the temple is "torn" from top to bottom and the centurion cries out, "Truly this man was the Son of God." These two form an "inclusio," or bookend structure encompassing the whole Gospel. At the beginning the heavens are torn open and the Father announces Jesus's divine Sonship. At the end, the temple curtain is torn open and, shockingly, a Gentile Roman centurion acknowledges that *in his suffering and death* Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God.

The descent of the Spirit recalls [Isaiah 11:2–3](#), where we learn that the Spirit of the Lord will rest on the Messiah. This indicates that the Messiah will live a life of faithful obedience to God. The allusions present in the voice from heaven confirm this.

1. The phrase, "You are my Son" alludes to [Psalm 2:7](#), an enthronement psalm, promising God's protection and deliverance for the king from David's line.
2. The phrase "With you I am well pleased" alludes to [Isaiah 42:1](#), where the Servant of the Lord is identified as God's chosen. In the larger context of Isaiah's "servant songs," this Servant will give himself as an atoning sacrifice for sin ([Isaiah 53](#)).
3. Finally, "beloved son," may allude to [Genesis 22:2](#), where God tells Abraham to "Take your beloved son, whom you love," and offer him as sacrifice to God. This would suggest a Jesus/Isaac typology, where Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son would be analogous to God's offering of his Son.

If all three allusions are present, this concise statement would present Jesus as the unique Son of God, who will offer himself as a sacrifice for sins.

**1:12–13** Immediately after this, the Spirit sends or "drives" Jesus into the wilderness. The strong language indicates the urgency of Jesus's task. The wilderness setting and the 40 days of testing suggest an Israel/Jesus typology. While Israel was tested for 40 years and failed, Jesus remains faithful and succeeds.



The Jordan River | Photo Credit: Phil Thompson, CC BY

The unusual statement “he was with the wild animals” appears only in Mark. Some see a positive image, alluding to the animals in Eden and so a new creation. Others see the wild animals as representing the danger of the place. This latter seems a bit more likely, since the care and protection of the angels is referred to in the same context.

## **Part I: The Authority of the Messiah (1:14–8:30)**

The first half of Mark’s Gospel (1:14–8:30) confirms that Jesus is the mighty Messiah and Son of God. Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming the kingdom of God and calling disciples.

### ***Jesus Proclaims the Kingdom and Calls Disciples (1:14–20)***

**1:14–15** The ministry begins with a passing reference to the arrest of John the Baptist. Mark’s purpose is to establish a transition from the ministry of John to that of Jesus. The details of John’s imprisonment and execution will be described later (ch. 6).

After John’s arrest, Jesus comes into Galilee preaching the “good news [*euangelion*] of God.” This good news is that “The time is fulfilled . . . The kingdom of God has come near.” The “time” refers to the eschatological arrival of salvation, ordained by God and predicted in the prophets (cf. [Gal 4:4](#)). “The kingdom of God” refers to God’s authoritative rule. Although God has always been Creator and sovereign Lord, his divine authority was challenged at the Fall ([Gen 3](#)). The Bible constitutes God’s rescue plan to restore creation and bring humanity back into a right relationship with himself.

The appropriate response to the kingdom is to “Repent and believe the good news.” Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. Repentance means turning away from sin and self-reliance. Believing is acknowledging God’s power alone to save.

**1:16–20** Jesus’s announcement of the kingdom of God is followed by his calling of disciples. Yet these candidates are surprising: two pairs of fishermen brothers. Fishermen were not high on the social ladder in first-century Judaism. Jesus’s manner of calling is also unusual. Normally a student would seek out a rabbi and request to follow him. Jesus instead approaches disciples and calls *them*. Playing off their present vocation, he says he will make them “fish for people.” This image of fishing for people appears several times in the OT, yet always in the context of judgment ([Jer 16:16](#); [Ezek 29:4–5](#); [38:4](#); [Amos 4:2](#); [Hab 1:14–17](#)). People are caught to face judgment. Jesus reverses the image: to fish for people is to rescue them from sin and death by calling them into God’s kingdom.

Mark stresses Jesus’s authority by saying that “immediately they left their nets and followed him.” The same immediacy occurs with James and John, yet they also leave their father Zebedee. This would be particularly shocking to a Jewish audience, where loyalty to family and clan were among the highest values.



Three of these four —Simon, James, and John—will become Jesus’s closest disciples, sometimes called his “inner circle.” Simon, nicknamed “Peter” (Greek for “rock” or “stone”) by Jesus, will become the chief representative of the others.

### ***Jesus Teaches and Drives Out an Evil Spirit (1:21–28)***

**1:21–22** The episodes in 1:21–39 are described as one long day of ministry in the town of Capernaum, Jesus’s base of operations while in Galilee. On the Sabbath (Friday evening at sundown) Jesus enters the synagogue and begins to teach. In the first century, most synagogues did not have a rabbi serving like a pastor over the congregation. Rather, a synagogue ruler would administrate the building and qualified teachers from the congregation would teach. Mark relates that the people were amazed at Jesus’s teaching. As we shall see, amazement is a major theme in Mark’s Gospel.

The people are amazed because Jesus taught “as one who had authority,” unlike the religious leaders. These religious leaders, traditionally called “scribes” (Greek: *grammateis*), were tasked with the interpretation and application of Jewish religious law, rendering decisions on the application of the Torah to everyday life. While the Pharisees were a religious party (see 2:16), the office of a scribe was a profession or vocation. Many scribes were also Pharisees, that is, members of the party of the Pharisees (see 2:16). The two groups appear together frequently in the Gospels. Scribes tended to refer to case precedent—the rulings of respected rabbis. They would say, “Rabbi so-and-so said . . .” By contrast, Jesus spoke with his own authority.

**1:23** Jesus’s preaching is interrupted by a man with an “unclean spirit.” The term “spirit” (*pneuma*) here means a demon, an evil spiritual entity in alliance with Satan. Mark uses the terms “demon” and “unclean spirit” synonymously. While traditionally translated as “unclean,” a better rendering is “impure” or “defiling.” This is not a “dirty demon” but rather a defiling entity, which opposes God’s goodness and holiness.

**1:24** The demon cries out, “What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” While there is only one demon here, he speaks of “us”. It is unlikely that the “us” refers to the demon and the man since Jesus has no intention of destroying the man. More likely, it refers to the demonic realm that responds with terror to Jesus’s coming. The demon’s claim that “I know who you are: the Holy One of God” is sometimes viewed as an attempt to gain authority over Jesus, since in the ancient world, knowledge of a demon’s name was one way to control it. This is possible, but Mark’s greater point is that these supernatural forces know who Jesus is, and they cower in fear.

**1:25** In response, Jesus silences the demon and commands it to come out of the man. This is the beginning of Mark’s “messianic secret,” where Jesus commands others to keep silent about his identity (see [Introduction](#)). We will discuss this theme more later. Here we simply note that Jesus silences demons to demonstrate his authority and to define his messiahship on his own terms.

**1:26–28** Jesus’s command results in immediate obedience. The demon shrieks, convulses the man, and departs. The people are again astonished at Jesus’s authority. Yet, surprisingly, they first refer to his authoritative teaching. Mark’s point seems to be that *the message* is central to Jesus’s mission. The exorcisms and healings are confirmation that Jesus is establishing God’s kingdom. Another important Markan theme — Jesus’s popularity — is now introduced: “At once the news about him spread throughout the entire vicinity of Galilee.”

#### ***Jesus Heals Peter’s Mother-in-law and Others (1:29–34)***

**1:29** This episode is presented as part of the continuing day of ministry in Capernaum. After casting out a demon in the Capernaum synagogue, Jesus goes with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. In first-century Palestine, it was not unusual for extended families to live together in the same compound. A first-century home excavated in Capernaum, believed by many to be Peter’s, is comprised of a series of buildings surrounding a central courtyard.<sup>12</sup>

**1:30–31** When Jesus arrives at Peter’s house, he is told that Peter’s mother-in-law is sick in bed. He goes in to see her, takes her by the hand, and heals her. Mark reports that the fever immediately left her, and she began to wait on them—evidence of her complete restoration.

**1:32–34** The healing is followed by a summary of healings and exorcisms that continue late into the night. The Sabbath ended at sunset, so people were now allowed to bring the sick to Jesus, without breaking the Sabbath prohibition of work. Mark uses characteristic hyperbole when he notes that *the whole town* gathered at the door. The so-called messianic secret (see [Introduction](#)) appears again as Jesus silences the demons “because they knew him.”

#### ***Jesus’s Prayer Life and Ministry Purpose (1:35–39)***

**1:35** The three closely connected episodes in Capernaum (1:21–29) conclude as Mark reports that very early the next morning, Jesus arose and went to a solitary place to pray. Despite his late and no doubt exhausting ministry the night before, Jesus is up at the crack of dawn. Mark clearly wants to identify Jesus’s prayer life—and hence his dependence on the Father—as a high priority in his life.

**1:36–39** When Simon and the other disciples find Jesus, they report, “Everyone is looking for you.” While the temptation for Jesus might be to bask in the adulation of the crowds, he has a mission to fulfill. So he tells the disciples, “Let’s go on to the neighboring villages so that I may preach there to fulfill. This is why I have come.” Rather than seeking praise, Jesus shows commitment to his Father’s mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God.

#### ***Jesus Heals a Man with a Skin Disease (1:40–45)***

**1:40** Having described Jesus’s messianic authority to cast out demons and to heal, Mark now recounts his ability to bring purity to defilement. The Hebrew and Greek terms traditionally translated “leprosy” describe a variety of skin disorders, some dangerous and some benign. This is clear from the descriptions in Leviticus 13–14, which do not fit the flesh-rotting disease known today as leprosy (Hansen’s disease). The “leprosy” described in Leviticus 13–14 caused ceremonial uncleanness and required the victim to be separated from family and community. Touching a person with leprosy rendered a person ceremonially unclean for a period of time, so that those with this disease had to live outside the community, wear torn clothing, and cry out “Unclean! Unclean!” when approached (Lev 13:45–46; Num 5:2–4). This man, however, boldly approaches Jesus and begs him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

**1:41–42** Jesus’s response is debated textually. While some manuscripts say that Jesus “was filled with compassion” (*splanchnistheis*), others say that he “was indignant” (*orgistheis*). This is a very difficult textual decision. The reading *orgistheis* appears in only a few Western manuscripts (D it<sup>a</sup> d ff<sup>2</sup> r<sup>1</sup>), so it has weak external evidence. Yet it is clearly the harder reading, and in textual criticism, the harder reading is usually the better one (later copyists tended to smooth out difficult readings). Remarkably, neither Matthew nor Luke refer to Jesus’s compassion here. If Mark was written first and both Matthew and Luke used him as a source, as most scholars believe, it is almost inconceivable that both would drop a reference to Jesus’s compassion! Yet it is easy to see why they would drop a puzzling reference to his indignation. So the internal evidence strongly favors *orgistheis*.

So if the original reading was “indignation,” what does this mean? Jesus’s anger is almost certainly not against the man, since he is about to show him compassion. It is rather against the ravaging effects of the disease, which caused isolation and separation from a person’s community of faith.

In response to the men’s request, Jesus says, “I am willing . . . Be made clean!” It is particularly striking that Jesus reaches out and touches him since such an act would normally render a person ceremonially unclean. There are three possibilities as to what is happening here. The first is that Jesus simply accepts temporary defilement. Such defilement was not a sin but simply resulted in a period of isolation (cf. Lev 11–15; Num 19:11–26). This view seems unlikely, however, since Jesus continues on his way. A second possibility is that Jesus rejects the OT laws of purity. This, too, seems unlikely, since Jesus tells the man to go to the priest and offer the sacrifices necessary for purification. A third possibility is that Jesus reverses the results of impurity. Rather than *being* defiled, he imparts purity. The power and authority of the kingdom of God bring light to darkness, and holiness to impurity.

**1:43–45** Finally, Jesus tells the man not to tell others about the healing. Again, we see the messianic secret, this time directed to those whom Jesus heals (see Introduction).

### ***Conflicts with the Religious Leaders (2:1–3:6)***

*Jesus Forgives and Heals a Paralyzed Man (2:1–12)*

**2:1–4** This episode is transitional. It is the last in a series of healing and exorcism stories and the first of five controversies with the religious leaders. Once again, the theme is Jesus’s messianic authority, in this case authority to forgive sins. The episode begins with another statement of popularity. Jesus returns to Capernaum and news quickly spreads. Crowds gather at “the house” (probably that of Simon and Andrew), and Jesus is teaching there. Four men attempt to bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus, but the crowds obstruct their way. “Crowds” perform a variety of functions as characters in Mark’s Gospel. While sometimes they are evidence of popularity, here they are an obstacle.

Finding no way through the crowd, they open a hole in the roof. Palestinian roofs were commonly flat and comprised of crossbeams covered by branches and packed dirt. This would provide enough strength for an upper floor, which could be reached by an external staircase or ladder. The four friends dig through the roof and lower their friend to Jesus.

**2:5–11** Jesus is impressed by their efforts, which he views as a sign of faith. Yet instead of healing the man, as everyone is expecting, he announces, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” The religious leaders respond with dismay, thinking to themselves that Jesus is blaspheming by claiming a prerogative of God. Yet ironically, while they are accusing Jesus of blasphemy, he is reading their mind—a prerogative of God alone! He challenges them with a rabbinic style lesser-to-greater argument: “Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat, and walk?’” It is of course easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” since this requires no external proof. A healing, by contrast, is immediately evident for all to see. But Jesus does not stop there. To prove “that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” he turns to the paralyzed man and says, “I tell you: get up, take your mat, and go home.”

Before describing the healing, we should say a word about the title Son of Man, used here for the first time in Mark’s Gospel. This was Jesus’s favorite messianic title for himself. The Hebrew phrase *ben adam* or its Aramaic parallel, *bar enosh*, both mean “son of man” or “a human being.” The most important background for the title is [Daniel 7:13–14](#), where an exalted messianic figure—one like a human being—comes before the Ancient of Days—that is, God himself—and is given authority, glory, sovereign power, and an eternal kingdom. All the nations of the world worship him. Jesus probably used the title for a variety of reasons, but especially because it was relatively unknown in Judaism and so he could define it on his own terms.

**2:12** The response to Jesus’s command is immediate. The man gets up and walks out in front of everyone. While no one could see the forgiveness of the sins, no one could miss Jesus’s healing power. The response of the crowd—as so often in Mark—is amazement. They praise God saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

*Jesus Calls Levi and Eats with Sinners (2:13-17)*

**2:13–14** The call of Levi is the second in a series of five controversial stories. It begins with Jesus walking beside the Sea of Galilee after teaching. He comes to the booth of a tax collector named Levi son of Alphaeus. The identity of this individual is debated. In the parallel in Matthew, the tax collector is identified as Matthew himself ([Matt 9:9](#)), and “Matthew the tax collector” is subsequently named as one of the Twelve ([Matt 10:3](#)). Luke and Mark instead identify this tax collector as Levi. Both also list “Matthew” as one of the Twelve ([Mark 3:18](#); [Luke 6:15](#)), but do not explicitly identify him as a tax collector or connect him with Levi. While some claim that Matthew’s Gospel has merged two different characters into one, the simplest explanation is that Matthew had two names—Matthew and Levi—or perhaps that he was a Levite, “Matthew the Levite.”

The tax booth was probably a customs office for goods in transit. Since at this time Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, ruled over Galilee as client king for the Romans, Levi is probably working for Herod. Whether under Herod or the Romans, tax collectors were despised by the Jewish population, both because of their reputation for dishonesty and their collusion with the hated Roman authorities. The Romans leased out the rights to collect taxes to the highest bidder, a system that was rife with corruption.

Jesus’s call to Levi to “Follow me” is a call to discipleship, just as Jesus called Simon and Andrew (1:16), and James and John (1:18). It would have been viewed as shocking by the religious establishment that Jesus would choose a disciple from such a despised profession. Common fishermen were bad enough, but a tax collector was unthinkable! Just as the two sets of brothers left everything to follow Jesus, so Levi immediately gets up and leaves behind his lucrative business.

**2:15–17** The scene now changes to a banquet in Levi’s home. The Greek text is actually a bit vague, simply saying “while he was reclining at the table in Levi’s house.” The first “he” is no doubt, Jesus. To “recline” indicates a formal banquet or dinner party, where guests would recline on low couches. Levi evidently held this banquet to celebrate his new vocation as a follower of Jesus and to invite his tax collector colleagues and friends to meet Jesus. Mark says Jesus’s disciples were present together with “sinners and tax-collectors”.

The religious leaders are aghast that Jesus, a respected rabbi, would dine with such riffraff, and question his disciples. Banquets in the first century were rituals of social status, and you ate with those you identified with. Jesus overhears the question and responds with a proverb and its application: “It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick.” Only those who recognize their illness seek medical help. He then applies the proverb to his ministry: “I didn’t come to call the righteous, but sinners.” The religious leaders are unwilling to repent because they do not think they are “sick.” By contrast, the tax collectors and sinners acknowledge their spiritual need. The first step in receiving God’s gift of salvation is to acknowledge our sin and need for God’s grace.

*Jesus Is Questioned about Fasting (2:18–22)*

**2:18** This is the third in a series of controversial stories (cf. 2:1–12, 13–17). Mark introduces the episode by noting that both the disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting. Fasting, or going without food for a time, was practiced for various reasons, including sorrow, repentance, self-denial or devotion. It is often linked together with prayer. The only fast established in the OT Law is for the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29, 31; 23:27–32; Num 29:7; cf. Acts 27:9), though various other fasts are mentioned during Israel’s postexilic period (Zech 7:5; 8:19; Esther 9:31). According to some traditions, the Pharisees fasted twice a week—on Monday and Thursday.<sup>13</sup> They viewed this as a sign of piety and so wondered why Jesus’s disciples did not fast.

**2:19** Jesus’s answer provides insight into his mission and message. He first draws an analogy to a wedding feast, the most extravagant celebration in common village life. It would be crazy to fast at a wedding when the bridegroom is still with the wedding guests. A wedding is a time of joy and feasting, not sorrow and fasting. The image takes on even greater significance when we realize that the OT sometimes describes God’s final salvation as a great banquet feast (Isa 25:6–8; 65:13–14; cf. Matt 8:11; Luke 13:29). Jesus identifies himself as the bridegroom and his ministry as a preview of this great celebration (cf. Matt 22:1–14; 25:1–13; Rev 19:7–9).

**2:20** Jesus warns, however, that the bridegroom will be taken away. At that time, his followers will indeed fast. The “taking” could refer to Jesus’s arrest, trial, and crucifixion, or, perhaps more likely, his departure at the Ascension, and the period of hardship, trials, and persecution that his disciples would experience.

**2:21–22** Jesus follows with two more analogies, both of which describe the nature of God’s salvific kingdom and the kingdom of God. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If they do, when the garment is washed and the patch shrinks, it tears the garment. Similarly, no one puts new wine into old wine skins. As the wine ferments, it will stretch and tear the wineskins. In both analogies, the old likely represents Judaism and the Mosaic covenant. His mission is not simply to reform Judaism but to fulfill it. The kingdom of God is arriving in his words and deeds, and with it, the new covenant and a new creation.

#### *Jesus Is Lord of the Sabbath (2:23–28)*

**2:23–24** Two Sabbath controversies conclude Mark’s series of five controversy stories (2:1–3:6). In the first, the disciples are walking through a grain field on the Sabbath and begin plucking heads of grain and eating them. The Pharisees, who have been watching Jesus closely, accuse them of breaking the Mosaic law. They are not accusing the disciples of stealing, since such gleaning was allowed (Deut 23:25), but rather of working on the Sabbath (Exod 31:14; cf. *m. Shabbath* 7:2).

**2:25–27** Jesus responds by referring to an episode in the OT, when David while hiding from King Saul, came to the tabernacle at Nob. He and his men were starving, and the high priest gave them the consecrated bread that only priests were allowed to eat (Lev 24:5–9).<sup>14</sup> Jesus’s point is that the law was intended to bless people, not to hurt them, so one commandment might supersede another. Jesus concludes with a proverb: “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.”

Jesus then adds a second application: “So then, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” Since the phrase “Son of Man” in Hebrew means human being, this second statement could simply reiterate the first. The Sabbath was created for human beings, so they have authority over it. But of course, the statement means much more than this, since Jesus has identified *himself* as the Son of Man, the glorious messianic figure of [Daniel 7:13–14](#). Jesus essentially says that, as the Son of Man, he has authority over the Sabbath. This is a remarkable claim since God himself established the Sabbath. Jesus is claiming the authority of God.

### *Healing on the Sabbath and the Plot against Jesus (3:1–6)*

**3:1–4** In the second Sabbath controversy, Jesus encounters a man with a paralyzed hand in the synagogue. The religious leaders are watching Jesus closely, hoping to accuse him of healing the man on the Sabbath. While Jesus could have taken the man outside and healed him secretly, instead he calls the man to stand in front of everyone. Jesus is going to publicly expose his opponents. He begins with a question, “Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” The point is that Jesus has the ability to do a good deed. Neglecting to help someone in need when you have the resources is evil. The second part of the statement, “to save life or to kill,” is puzzling, since the man’s condition is not a matter of life or death. Its meaning will become clear at the end of the episode.

**3:5–6** When the religious leaders refuse to answer, Jesus looks at them in anger, distressed by their stubborn hearts. Mark’s Gospel stresses Jesus’s human emotions more than the others. He then heals the man, saying, “Stretch out your hand.” Rather than praising God for this miraculous healing, the Pharisees go out and begin to plot with the Herodians concerning how they can kill Jesus. There are two points of irony here. First, the Pharisees and the Herodians are strange bedfellows. The Herodians were supporters of the Herodian dynasty and pro-Roman. The Pharisees despised the Roman authorities and longed for the coming Messiah who would destroy Israel’s enemies. Yet the two groups join together here against their common enemy. The other more significant irony is that while the Pharisees accuse Jesus of violating the Sabbath, in fact, the healing is an act of kindness, exactly what *should* be done on the Sabbath. By contrast, the Pharisees are plotting murder, certainly a greater Sabbath violation!

### ***Summary of Jesus’s Ministry (3:7–12)***

The plot against Jesus described in [Mark 3:6](#) is the climax of the five controversies in 2:1–3:6. That climax, together with the summary of Jesus’s ministry here in 3:7–12 marks a transition to a new phase in Jesus’s ministry, sometimes called the “later Galilean ministry.”

Jesus's messianic authority is still center stage, but here everything is magnified. Jesus not only heals the sick but raises the dead (5:21–43). He does not just defeat one demon, but a “legion” of demons (5:21–43). He demonstrates mastery over the forces of nature, by calming an angry sea (4:35–41). There is also a magnified demarcation between Jesus and his enemies. By choosing twelve apostles he essentially reconstitutes Israel, suggesting the illegitimacy of the present leadership. The battle lines are being drawn and the key question is “Whose side are you on?”

This passage serves as both summary and transition. Mark describes how, in the face of opposition, Jesus withdraws with his disciples to the Sea of Galilee. Yet his reputation grows and the crowds throng to see him. Mark says they came from everywhere—north (Tyre, Sidon), south (Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea), and east (Perea), to see Jesus. Because of the press of crowds, Jesus develops a unique method of crowd control. He tells his disciples to have a small boat ready. If the crowds pressed against him, he can stand or sit in the boat with the people on the shore. This created a kind of buffer and a stage from which to teach. This popularity, Mark points out, was related to both Jesus's authority to heal (3:10) and his exorcisms (3:11–12). Mark again points out Jesus's authority over demons, silencing them when they cry out their recognition that he is the “Son of God” (cf. 1:25, 34).

### ***Choosing the Twelve (3:13–19)***

The summary in 3:7–12 brings the first part of Jesus's Galilean ministry to a close. The new phase that follows demonstrates increased division between those for Jesus and those against him. This section is framed at the beginning and end with key accounts related to the disciples. At the beginning (3:13–19), Jesus appoints the Twelve to be his apostles. At the end, Jesus sends the Twelve out to preach and heal (6:6–13). In contrast to the apostles stand the religious leaders, Jesus's own family (who think he is crazy), and his own hometown, which rejects him. Ironically, those who should be his chief supporters—his own people (cf. [John 1:11](#))—oppose him.

**3:12–15** Jesus goes into the hills of Galilee and summons “those he wanted,” and from this larger group appointed twelve to be his closest followers. The phrase, “whom he also named apostles” is absent from some manuscripts and may be a copyist addition drawn from [Luke 6:13](#). While Luke commonly refers to the twelve as “apostles,” Mark does so only here and at 6:30. The word “apostle” means a messenger, or one sent out with a commission. The Twelve are appointed, first, to “be with him” (3:14a), that is to watch him and learn from him, and second, to extend his ministry to all of Israel by preaching the kingdom of God and casting out demons (3:14b–15).

The number twelve is surely significant, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus clearly saw his task as calling forth the restored remnant of Israel. The fact that Jesus does not identify himself as one of the Twelve is also significant. Just as Yahweh himself called the twelve tribes into existence, Jesus acts in the role of Yahweh to create a restored people of God.



**3:16–19** Mark next lists the Twelve (cf. Matt. 10:2–4; Luke 6:14–16; Acts 1:13). Simon is always named first, as leader and representative of the apostles. Mark notes that Jesus nicknamed him “Peter” (Greek, *Petros*), meaning rock or stone. He does not say why, but the likely reason is that while at first unsteady, Peter would become a foundation stone for the apostolic church (see Matt 16:13–20; Acts 2–5; 10–11). The next two names are James and John, who with Peter will form the “inner circle” of disciples. Jesus nicknamed James and John *Boanerges*, an Aramaic word meaning “sons of thunder,” perhaps referring to their fiery personalities. The next name on the list is Andrew who together with his brother Simon was called from his trade of fishing (1:16). Andrew plays a more significant role in John’s Gospel, where he is frequently seen bringing people to Jesus (John 1:40–44; 6:8–9; 12:20–22).

The seven names that follow appear only in this verse of Mark’s Gospel: Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot. Philip also has a more prominent role in John’s Gospel, where he, like Andrew, is seen bringing others to Jesus (John 1:45; 12:21, 22; cf. 14:8). Bartholomew means “son of Tolmai,” and may be another name for Nathaniel, whom Philip introduced to Jesus in John 1:45. Matthew is not here called a tax collector but is likely the same person as Levi the tax-collector (cf. 2:13–17). Thomas is mentioned only here in Mark’s Gospel but will become notorious in John’s Gospel because of his doubts about Jesus’s resurrection (John 21:24–29). James the son of Alphaeus may be the same as “James the younger/shorter” of Mark 15:40. He may also be the brother of Matthew Levi, since both are said to be the “son of Alphaeus” (2:14; 3:18). Next on the list is the other Simon, called a “Cananaean” (*Kananaion*), an Aramaic term meaning “zealous one.” This could mean that he was zealous for the law, or perhaps that he was previously a political rebel or insurrectionist. If the latter, we see a stark contrast between Matthew, a former Roman collaborator, and Simon, a former insurrectionist. These two disciples likely prompted interesting political discussions around the campfire! The last name on the list is Judas Iscariot, whom Mark simply identifies as the one “who betrayed him.” “Iscariot” may mean “man from Kerioth,” a town of uncertain location in Judea.

The appointment of the Twelve sets the stage for the conflict ahead, between the restored remnant Israel advocating for the kingdom of God, and those in opposition to it.

### ***Jesus’s True Family and the Beelzebul Controversy (3:20–35)***

The conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders reaches a climax in the Beelzebul controversy, as the religious leaders accuse Jesus of casting out demons by Satan’s power, and he then accuses them of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. This is the first example in Mark’s Gospel of intercalation or “sandwiching,” where one episode is interrupted by another, and then concludes. The two have either the same or contrasting themes. This sandwich begins with Jesus’s return “home,” presumably meaning Capernaum.

**3:20–21** Again, a crowd gathers—a scene of popularity common throughout Mark’s gospel. Yet celebrity status has its drawbacks, and Jesus and his disciples barely have time to eat. His family becomes concerned about Jesus’s physical and mental health and comes to take charge of him, saying “He’s out of his mind.” Evidently, they set out from Nazareth to Capernaum to bring him home.

**3:22–30** That episode pauses and a new one starts, as Jesus is accused by the teachers of the law of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul, “the ruler of demons” (3:22). “Beelzebul” was originally a title for the Canaanite god Baal, likely meaning “Baal the Prince.” In time it came to be used by the Jews as another name for Satan.<sup>15</sup> Jesus responds to this accusation with two arguments. First, he points out that Satan would be crazy to cast out his own demons, since “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand” (3:24). Second, Jesus clarifies that although Satan is not opposing himself, he *is* being defeated. No one can plunder a strong man’s house unless he first ties him up. Jesus here describes his exorcisms as plundering Satan’s possessions, that is, taking back people who have been captured by Satan. The kingdom of God is invading and overwhelming the realm of Satan.

After refuting their claim that he is acting on Satan’s behalf, Jesus attacks the religious leaders for their unbelief. He points out that every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven, except for one—the “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.”

#### *What is the Unpardonable Sin?*

What is this “whoever blasphemes against the Spirit” that cannot be forgiven? Mark gives us a clue by noting that Jesus said this, “because they were saying ‘He has an unclean spirit’” (3:30). The implication is that the blasphemy here is *attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan*. Since the Holy Spirit is the one who reveals all truth, to reject the Spirit’s work means to finally and completely reject God.

**3:31–35** The first episode in Mark’s “sandwich” resumes with the arrival of Jesus’s family in Capernaum. Jesus is in a house with his disciples when word comes: “Look, your mother, your brothers, your sisters are outside asking for you.” Jesus responds, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Looking at his disciples, he says, “Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (3:33–34). This is a shocking statement in a culture where family, clan, and nation had one’s ultimate allegiance. Jesus defines his true family not by physical but by spiritual bonds—those who do the will of God.

In summary, this intercalation (sandwich) shows Jesus’s own people—his family and Israel’s leaders—rejecting him, and the establishment of new family relationships. This message would have great significance for the church of Mark’s day, where following Jesus often resulted in rejection by family, friends, and society. This also has an application for us today. Our true brothers and sisters are not our physical family, nor those of our race or ethnicity. Rather, they are our spiritual brothers and sisters around the world.

### ***The Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation (4:1–20)***

**4:1–2** Following the Beelzebul controversy, Jesus begins to teach in parables. Jesus’s method of crowd control, mentioned in 3:9, is repeated here in more detail. Jesus sits in a boat a few feet offshore while the people listen from the shore. Mark says that Jesus was teaching many things in “parables.” The Greek word *parabolē* has a broader meaning than the English word “parable” and can refer to a variety of literary devices, including sayings, proverbs, analogies, metaphors, similes, or true parables. Here, Jesus tells a true parable—a story from everyday life with a spiritual application.

**4:3–8** Jesus begins with a call to attentiveness, “Listen!” The first parable describes a typical agrarian scene. A farmer scatters seed in his field, with varying results. Some seed falls on the hard ground and so does not find root, so the birds gobble it up. The second seed falls on rocky ground, with only thin soil. It starts to grow, but its shallow roots make it vulnerable to the sun’s scorching rays, and it withers and dies. The third seed falls among thorns, choking out the plants. The fourth seed, however, falls on good soil. With deep roots and good moisture, it sprouts and produces a good crop multiplying 30, 60, and even 100 times.

**4:9** Jesus concludes with another call to listen: “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen.” This statement, which recalls [Jeremiah 5:21](#) and [Ezekiel 12:2](#), could mean either that everyone has ears and so everyone should listen. Or it could mean that only those with spiritual insight given by God can truly comprehend the message. The latter meaning fits well with Jesus’s explanation of why he teaches in parables in verse 12. But the former fits better with Jesus’s overall message, which is a call to all people to respond in faith.

**4:10–12** When Jesus is alone with his disciples, they ask him why he speaks in parables. Jesus’s answer is puzzling: “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those outside, everything comes in parables.” He then quotes from [Isaiah 6:9–10](#), where Jesus seems to say that he teaches in parables *so that people will not understand*. What is going on here? The likely answer is to be found in the previous context. Those on the “inside” refer to the disciples, who have responded positively to Jesus’s kingdom announcement. Parables are understandable to them because their hearts are open. The “outsiders” are the religious leaders, who have rejected Jesus’s message. In the previous episode, they have committed the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, rejecting the Spirit’s work and intentionally turning to darkness. God will now blind their eyes, using their unbelief to accomplish his salvation plan.

This is not much different from the response of Pharaoh in the Exodus. Pharaoh repeatedly rejected God’s command to set Israel free, so God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and used his rejection to accomplish God’s great salvation ([Exod 8:15, 32; 9:12; 10:1](#); cf. [Rom 11:25–32](#)). In the same way, God will use the rejection of the religious leaders to accomplish his salvation through Jesus’s death on the cross.

**4:13–20** Following this explanation, Jesus interprets the parable. The seed represents the word of God. For some, like seed on the hard path, the word never implants itself and Satan steals away the message before it can gain root. Still others, like the seed in rocky soil, receive the word with joy, but their roots are shallow and, when persecution comes, they fall away. Still others are like seed among thorns. The thorns represent the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things, which choke out the word, making it unfruitful. Finally, some seed falls on good ground and produces a bountiful crop.

The parable must be understood in the context of Jesus's ministry, where those with open hearts are responding in faith to the kingdom of God, while others, like the religious leaders, are stubbornly pursuing their own agendas.

### ***More Parables (4:21–34)***

**4:21–23** Following the parable of the sower and its interpretation, Jesus continues to teach with a number of sayings and analogies. The first analogy is about spiritual light. You do not bring a lamp into the house and then hide it under a bowl or a bed. Instead, you put it on a stand so that it will light up the house. The analogy is followed by a proverb explaining its meaning in two parallel synonymous phrases: “For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed, and nothing concealed that will not be brought to light” (4:22). Another call to listen follows, “if anyone has ears to hear, let him listen” (4:23; cf. 4:9). The lamp here likely refers to the message of the kingdom or the kingdom itself. Although the kingdom is appearing at present in a veiled form, one day it will be fully revealed.

**4:24–25** The second analogy is drawn from the marketplace. A person's integrity in the grain market was evident by the accuracy of their scales and their measuring containers. Jesus says, “By the measure you use, it will be measured to you — and more will be added to you.” The analogy essentially means, “What goes around comes around” or “You get out of life what you put into it.” Those who make the effort to hear and respond to the kingdom of God will receive back on their investment even more.

The proverb that follows is set in antithetical parallelism: “Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” Those who respond positively to the kingdom will receive even greater revelation, while those who reject it will be blinded even more. This interpretation fits Jesus's explanation for why he teaches in parables in 4:11–12.

**4:26–29** Two similitudes or short parables follow (4:26–29, 30–34). Both explain the nature and growth of the kingdom. The first is the parable of the growing seed. A farmer plants a seed and then goes about his daily business. The plant grows on its own, from seed to harvest. The point is that the kingdom of God is ultimately the work of God, who will bring it to pass through his sovereign power.

**4:30–32** The second similitude is the parable of the mustard seed. Though the smallest of all seeds, the mustard seed grows into a great plant on which birds can nest. The point is that the kingdom will begin very small yet will eventually fill the whole earth. The accuracy of Jesus's words is sometimes challenged, since the mustard seed is not technically the smallest seed on earth. But Jesus is not speaking with scientific precision. He is describing life as people know it, and the mustard seed was the smallest seed known in that day. Another question is whether the birds nesting are symbolic (of the Gentile nations?) or whether they simply illustrate the size of the bush (big enough to build a nest). Finally, the significance of the mustard plant is also debated. Mustard was considered an invasive and potentially dangerous plant, and some have suggested that it means the kingdom will be viewed as a threat as it grows and advances.

**4:33–34** Mark notes in conclusion that this is just a representative sample of Jesus's teaching. He also continues the theme of *revealing and concealing* (cf. 4:11–12) by noting that Jesus spoke *only* in parables to the people but explained them to the disciples.

#### ***Authority over Nature: Calming the Storm (4:35–41)***

Jesus has been demonstrating his messianic authority in teaching, healing, exorcism, and forgiving sins. Now he will do so through his first “nature miracle,” demonstrating his mastery over the wind and the waves.

**4:35** Mark is fond of triads, or groups of three, and this is the first of three boat scenes in Mark's Gospel (4:35–41; 6:45–52; 8:14–21). Each of the three in some way illustrates the disciples' failure or lack of faith. Mark introduces this event as occurring, “On that day when evening had come,” that is, on the day Jesus was teaching in parables. While Mark does not always follow a chronological order, he here treats the events of 4:1–5:3 as a single day of ministry (cf. 1:21–34).

**4:36** They are probably in Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Lake and Jesus instructs the disciples to cross over to the other side. Mark reports that they took him along “since he was in the boat.” This unusual expression may indicate that he had been teaching in the boat, and they left from there without returning to shore. Mark mentions incidentally that there were other boats with them

**4:37–38** Some time into the trip a storm breaks out and threatens to swamp the boat. The Sea of Galilee is susceptible to violent storms, as cool air rushes down the surrounding mountains and collides with the warm air in the Lake's basin. Jesus remains asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat, perhaps a result of his exhaustion after a long day of ministry, or perhaps evidence of his trust in God despite the danger (Pss 3:5; 4:8; Prov 3:24). The disciples, however, have no such confidence. At wit's end, they wake Jesus and cry out, “Teacher! Don't you care that we're going to die!”

**4:39–40** Jesus gets up, rebukes the wind, and speaks to the waves, “Silence! Be still!” The wind immediately stops, and the Sea becomes completely calm. He then turns to the disciples and rebukes them as well, “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?” There is an obvious narrative tension here. The disciples are spiritual “insiders” who receive the secrets of the kingdom (4:11). Yet from this point on they repeatedly waiver and fail.

Since Jesus elsewhere rebukes demons (1:25; cf. 3:12; 9:25), some commentators claim that the storm is portrayed here as a demonic force. While this is possible, a more likely background is the OT, where God is said to command the sea (Pss 18:15; 65:5–7; 89:9; 104:7; 106:9; 107:23–29; Isa 50:2; Nah 1:4).

**4:41** The disciples recognize this divine power and are terrified, asking, “Who is this? Even the wind and waves obey him!” This is a key theme throughout the first half of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus’s extraordinary authority results in the question, “Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!” The answer is, he is the mighty Messiah and Son of God. This is the conclusion Peter will reach in 8:29, the key center-point in the narrative.

### ***Authority over Demons: The Gerasene Demoniac (5:1–20)***

This episode is closely connected to the previous one. Following Jesus’s calming of the storm, the boat lands on the eastern shore of the lake, in the region of Gerasa.



First-century fishing boat recovered from the Sea of Galilee  
Credit: Phil Thompson, CC BY-SA 4.0

**5:1** The actual location is debated. Some manuscripts identify it as the region of the “Gerasenes”; others say “Gadarenes,” and still others “Gergesenes.” The confusion apparently arose because Gerasa (modern Jerash) is 35 miles southeast of the lake. Gadara was much closer, but still 5 miles southeast of the lake. Gergesa, is an unknown place, but may be Khursi, or Kersa, a location on the eastern shore. This last makes the most sense geographically but has weak textual support. There are two main possibilities. (1) The original reading was “Gerasa,” but copyists changed this to “Gadara” or “Gergesa” because they thought Gerasa was too far. (2) Conversely, the original reading may have been “Gergesa,” but copyists did not know that location, so they changed it to the more familiar “Gerasa.” In any case, we can be quite certain this was on the eastern side of the lake, in Decapolis, which is predominately Gentile territory. Decapolis means “ten cities,” and refers to a confederation of ten Greek city states, located mostly east and south of Galilee.

**5:2–8** As Jesus disembarks, a demon-possessed man rushes toward him. Mark gives a long and vivid description of the man’s pitiful condition. As in other demonic episodes, the demon recognizes Jesus and is terrified. He falls down in submission and cries out, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you before God, don’t torment me!” Mark explains that Jesus had already ordered the demon to come out.

**5:9** In response, Jesus does something strange: he asks the demon its name. As we have noted before, some believe this was a way to gain power over demonic forces. Yet we know from previous episodes that Jesus does not need magic or spells; he acts with his own divine authority. Most likely the purpose of the question is to reveal the powerful nature of this demonic presence. The demon replies, “My name is Legion . . . because we are many.” This is no normal possession. A legion was a Roman battalion of approximately 6,000 soldiers. This does not mean that there were 6,000 demons but only—as the demon says—that there were many.

**5:10–12** The episode gets even stranger when the demons try to bargain with Jesus, begging him to send them into a herd of pigs grazing nearby. The reason for the request is unclear. In Luke’s account the demons beg Jesus not to send them into “the Abyss,” evidently a place of captivity where some demons are kept. The demons might therefore want to continue to roam the earth, rather than to be held captive.

**5:13** Surprisingly, Jesus agrees and lets the demons enter the pigs. Yet the scene turns chaotic, as the spooked pigs—2,000 in all—rush off a cliff and are drowned. Since in the ancient world the Sea is sometimes associated with chaos, or the underworld, the irony may be that the demons get what they sought to avoid—incarceration in the Abyss.

**5:14–20** The pig herders are terrified at the carnage and rush off to report what has happened. When the townspeople come to investigate, they are confronted with two contrasting scenes. On the one side is the man, radically transformed, clothed and in his right mind. On the other side is chaos and destruction, a herd of drowned pigs. Tragically, rather than seeing the transformation Jesus can accomplish, they fear monetary loss and beg Jesus to leave. In contrast, the man begs to go with Jesus, that is, to become his disciple. Jesus, however, sends him back home to proclaim the good news of what the Lord has done for him. Rather than a disciple (“follower”) he becomes an “apostle”—one sent with a commission.

Curiously, Jesus does not command silence; there is no messianic secret here (see [Introduction](#)). The likely reason is that this is Gentile territory. People here would not be expecting a conquering Messiah, and so Jesus does not have to redefine his role for them. The episode ends with the man obeying Jesus’s command, proclaiming the message throughout the Decapolis. As throughout Mark, people respond with amazement (cf. 1:20, 27; 2:12).

### ***Authority over Disease and Death (5:21–43)***

**5:21–24** Mark continues his series of connected events, as Jesus and the disciples cross back to the western shore. When Jesus leaves the boat, a large crowd meets him. Among them is a synagogue administrator named Jairus, who falls at Jesus’s feet and begs him to heal his daughter, who is dying. Jesus goes immediately, with a large crowd pressing against him.

**5:25–29** A new character is now introduced: a woman who has suffered for twelve years from chronic bleeding—probably a menstrual disorder. Mark points out her hopelessness: no physician has been able to help her, and their attempts have only made her worse. (In his parallel, Luke drops the statement about physicians, perhaps to protect his profession!) The woman approaches Jesus from behind, thinking “If I just touch his clothes, I’ll be made well.” Sure enough, when she touches him, she feels his power come out and her bleeding stops.

**5:30–34** Jesus, however, feels it too. He turns around and asks, “Who touched my clothes?” The disciples are puzzled, since everyone is pressing against him. But Jesus keeps looking for the woman until she comes forward, falls at his feet and confesses what she has done. Rather than rebuking her, Jesus responds, “Daughter . . . your faith has saved you.” It is important to note that it was her faith, not a magical touch, that resulted in the healing.

**5:35–36** While the healing should provoke rejoicing, tragedy now strikes, as a report comes from Jairus’s home that his daughter has died. Overhearing this, however, Jesus reassures Jairus, “Don’t be afraid. Only believe.” Just as the woman’s faith resulted in her healing, so Jairus must continue to believe in Jesus’s saving power.



**5:37–38** When they arrive at Jairus’s house, Jesus takes only the parents and his inner circle of disciples—Peter, James and John— into the room where the girl’s body is lying. They encounter a large group of mourners crying and wailing. In the ancient Near East, the intensity of mourning demonstrated one’s love for the departed, so professional mourners were sometimes hired to make sure the mourning was great (cf. [Jer 9:17–18](#); [Matt 9:23](#); [11:17](#); [Luke 7:12](#)).

**5:39–43** When Jesus challenges the need for mourning with the claim that “The child is not dead but asleep,” the mourners laugh, perhaps revealing the superficiality of their grief. Jesus responds by putting them out of the room. He then takes the girl by the hand and says to her, “*Talitha Koum!*” Mark here records Jesus’s original Aramaic words and then gives a translation in Greek: “Little girl, say to you, get up!” The girl immediately arises and begins to walk around. Those in the room are utterly shocked, another example of amazement in Mark’s Gospel (cf. 1:20, 27; 2:12; 5:20). We also see the continuing theme of the messianic secret, as Jesus strictly orders the parents not to tell anyone what has happened (cf. 1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26; see [Introduction](#)). Jesus also tells them to give the girl something to eat. This is likely meant to confirm that she has fully recovered (her appetite is back) and to show Jesus’s care and compassion.

These two miracles represent the second of Mark’s intercalations, where one episode is “sandwiched” in the middle of another (cf. 3:20–35). There are several interesting parallels between the two episodes. We have already noted the key theme of faith, which results in restoration in both cases. Second, Jesus addresses the woman with the bleeding disorder as “daughter”—the only time he addresses someone this way in Mark’s Gospel. And the girl of course is a daughter to Jairus. The woman has been suffering for 12 years; and the little girl is 12 years old. Finally, the woman’s disorder would result in ceremonial defilement. In the same way, touching a dead body would normally bring defilement. But in each case Jesus brings purity to defilement.

This theme of defilement is important in this whole section of Mark’s Gospel: the previous episode was full of symbols of defilement: impure spirits, the tombs of dead bodies, the unclean pigs. In chapter 7 Jesus will address the issue of ceremonial defilement. The point is that with the coming of the kingdom, Jesus reverses the results of defilement and brings purity and healing to a fallen creation.

Just as this section of Mark’s Gospel reveals Jesus’s extraordinary authority, so it shows continued opposition. In the next episode, Jesus’s own hometown opposes him.

### ***Unbelief at Nazareth (6:1–6a)***

Just as the first series of miracles and controversy stories (1:20–3:6) concluded with a statement of opposition and the plot against Jesus’s life (3:1–6), so the second series of miracle stories (4:35–5:43) ends with a statement of strong rejection, foreshadowing the rejection Jesus will receive from his own people in Jerusalem.

**6:1** The episode begins with Mark's statement that Jesus left there—probably meaning Capernaum—and went to his hometown. The hometown is not named, but Nazareth is implied from 1:9 and 1:2. In Luke's parallel, Nazareth is explicitly named ([Luke 4:16](#)).

**6:2–4** Mark reports that on the Sabbath Jesus began to teach in the synagogue. As noted earlier (1:21), in a Jewish synagogue any qualified teacher might be invited to give the synagogue sermon. Jesus has a reputation as a gifted teacher and so he is invited to speak. As in his first synagogue sermon in Capernaum (1:22), the response is amazement. The people respond with a series of rhetorical questions, wondering about his remarkable abilities in light of his humble origins.

From this passage we learn several things about Jesus's family life: (1) His occupation is a carpenter or builder (the Greek word *tektōn* can refer to someone who works with wood, metal or stone). (2) His mother's name is Mary. The fact that he is called "Mary's son" may indicate that Joseph has died by this time. (3) He had four brothers—James, Joseph, Judas [or Jude], and Simon—and at least two sisters. Jesus's siblings are also mentioned in [John 7:5](#) and [Acts 1:14](#), and we know of James and the brothers from Paul ([1 Cor 9:5](#); [Gal 1:19](#); [2:9, 12](#)) and because of James's leadership role in [Acts 12:17](#); [15:13](#); [21:18](#)). James and Jude also wrote NT letters.

Some commentators think the response of the townspeople is negative from the beginning, expressing disdain at Jesus's claim to be someone special. Others see the initial response as positive then turning negative. In any case, Jesus gives the reason for their offense in his teaching that follows: "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown, among his own relatives and in his household." Jesus's extraordinary abilities seem presumptuous for someone from such humble origins.

**6:5–6** The next statement is surprising, as Mark notes that, "He was not able to do a miracle there . . ." This seems like an odd statement in a gospel where Jesus's divine authority has been on center stage. In his parallel, Matthew smooths over the problem by saying that, "he *did not* do many miracles there" ([Matt 13:58](#)). Yet Mark's statement makes good sense in the context of Jesus's ministry, where Jesus is performing miracles in response to faith. Those who respond positively to his preaching receive salvation benefits. Those who reject the message miss out. Jesus essentially says, "I cannot do anything for you if you have no faith."

Yet there is also heavy irony here, as Mark notes that Jesus could do no miracles there, ". . . *except* that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them." A bad day for Jesus is to heal only a few sick people! The passage ends with Jesus's amazement at their lack of faith. Ironically, here is a twist on the amazement theme. Typically, people are amazed at Jesus's power and authority. Now, ironically, *Jesus* is amazed that his authoritative message falls on deaf ears.

### ***Sending out the Twelve (6:6b-13)***

A third major section of Mark's Gospel begins here with the sending out of the Twelve. This section emphasizes the expansion of Jesus's ministry both geographically and ethnically. It continues until the midpoint of the Gospel in chapter 8, with Peter's confession and Jesus's first passion prediction (8:29–32).

In 1:16–19, Jesus *called* his first disciples. Then in 3:13–19, Jesus *appointed* the Twelve to send them out to preach, heal, and cast out demons. Now in 6:6b–13, he *sends* them out. These episodes occur at the beginning of each of the three sections making up the first half of Mark's Gospel. This shows the importance of discipleship for Mark's theological purpose.

**6:6b–7** Jesus brings the Twelve together and sends them out two-by-two. The reason for this is likely for support, protection, and fellowship. It may also be related to the OT command to have two witnesses to confirm a testimony in court (Deut 17:6; 19:15; cf. Num 35:30).

**6:8–9** Jesus gives detailed instructions about what they can and cannot take with them on the journey. They can carry a staff and wear sandals and the clothes on their backs. But they must take no extra clothing or provisions and no money to buy these things. The reason is to depend completely on God and on the hospitality of others.

**6:10–11** Jesus continues to explain that when they enter a house to receive hospitality, they are to stay in that place until they leave town. The reason for this is likely to avoid the temptation to move up the social ladder as their circle of friends grows, which could produce favoritism, greed, and division. If they are not welcomed in any particular place, they are to shake the dust off their feet “as a testimony against them.” This may be related to the tradition of the rabbis, who shook off the dust of foreign lands when they returned to the Holy Land. The point seems to be to leave those who reject them to God's judgment (cf. Acts 13:51).

**6:12–13** The episode concludes with the mission itself, as the disciples go out preaching, driving out demons, and anointing people with oil. The practice of using olive oil in prayer for the sick appears in the NT only here and in James 5:14–15. While oil was used medicinally in the ancient world (Isa 1:6; Luke 10:34), here it likely represents the healing presence of God's Spirit.

### ***Flashback to the Death of John the Baptist (6:14–29)***

Mark referred briefly to the arrest of John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus's ministry (1:14). Now, by means of a flashback, he details John's arrest, imprisonment, and execution. This episode is sometimes viewed as an intercalation (sandwich) with the mission of the Twelve. The account of John's execution (6:14–19) interrupts the departure (6:6b–13) and return (6:30) of the Twelve. If this is intentional on Mark's part, the common theme may be the cost of discipleship. John pays the ultimate price for his faithfulness to the kingdom of God, a mission the disciples are also fulfilling.

**6:14–16** The occasion that sparks the flashback are reports reaching Herod Antipas concerning Jesus. People are speculating about his identity, whether he is Elijah, one of the prophets, or even John the Baptist risen from the dead. Herod's conscience is evidently bothering him for his actions against John and so he assumes the worst: "John has been raised from the dead." Mark then launches into the story to explain what happened to John.

**6:17–20** Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39. Herod divorced his first wife and married Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Marriage to a brother's wife was forbidden in the Old Testament (Lev 18:6; 20:21), except in the case of Levirate marriage (cf. Deut 25:5–10).

When John criticized Herod for the marriage, Herod arrested John and (according to Josephus) imprisoned him at Machaerus, a fortress east of the Dead Sea. Mark tells us that Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted him dead. But Herod kept him alive, both because he feared John as a holy man and because he enjoyed listening to him.

**6:21–25** Herodias's opportunity finally arose at a birthday banquet Herod threw for himself. All the elites of Galilee were present, and Herodias's daughter danced for the guests. The dance has been traditionally viewed as an erotic one, but the girl's age is not stated, and it could have been a child's performance. The traditional interpretation, however, is perhaps more likely. The girl seems quite mature, since she is aware of the court intrigue. She even embellishes her mother's request by asking for John's head "on a platter" and "immediately." Furthermore, the fact that Herod is willing to deliver a human head to her on a platter would suggest she is not a young child.

Her dance so pleased Herod that he offered her anything, up to half his kingdom. The offer recalls that made by the king of Persia to Esther in Esther 5:3, 6; 7:2. It is a stereotypical way of saying, "Ask me whatever you want, and I'll give it to you." After consulting with her mother, the daughter returns and asks for John's head. By asking for it in such a public manner and immediately Herodias and her daughter ensure that Herod cannot delay the execution and back out later.

**6:26–28** In order not to be humiliated before his guests, Herod agrees to the execution. Through the whole sordid affair, Herod is shown to be an immoral, pathetic, and spineless ruler. He is thus the opposite of John, who boldly speaks the truth no matter what the cost.

**6:29** The episode concludes with John's disciples learning about the execution and coming to retrieve John's body and give it an honorable burial.

The story presents a stark contrast between Jesus, the true servant king, and Herod, Rome's weak and vacillating puppet. It also foreshadows the story playing out in Mark's Gospel. Just as they rejected the forerunner of the Messiah, so they will reject the Messiah himself.

### ***Feeding Five Thousand (6:30–44)***

**6:30–34** The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle that appears in all four Gospels. Here in Mark it follows the mission of the Twelve, after the disciples return and report to Jesus what they have done and taught. Jesus recognizes that they need some rest, so he takes them away by boat for a spiritual retreat. Unfortunately, some of the people see them leave and recognize Jesus. They begin running along the shore and when Jesus and the disciples land, a large crowd has already gathered. Rather than being angry or frustrated, Jesus “had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Shepherd imagery is pervasive throughout the OT. Moses was a shepherd; David was a shepherd. Most importantly, the Lord is our shepherd (Psalm 23). In John’s Gospel, Jesus explicitly identifies himself as the good shepherd and contrasts himself with thieves, who steal the sheep, or hired hands, who do not care for them (John 10:11–18).

**6:35–37** Late in the day, Jesus’s disciples encourage him to “send them away so that they can go into the surrounding countryside and villages to buy themselves something to eat.” This seems like a reasonable request, but Jesus will have none of it. He says, “You give them something to eat.” The request seems absurd to the disciples: “Should we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give them something to eat?” (6:37 CSB). A denarius was worth about a day’s wages for a laborer, hence the NIV’s translation: “That would take more than half a year’s wages” (v. 37).

**6:38–41** When Jesus sends them to check how much food they have, they return, saying “five, and two fish.” (Only John’s Gospel reports that it was Andrew who found a boy with these provisions [John 6:9].) The loaves were likely pita-sized, for a single serving. Jesus tells the disciples to seat the people on the “green grass” (possibly shepherd imagery from Ps 23:2) and they organize them in groups of 100s and 50s. Taking the bread, he looks up to heaven, gives thanks, and breaks it, giving it to his disciples, who distribute it to the people. He then does the same with the fish.

**6:42–44** Mark summarizes the miracle in a short sentence: “Everyone ate and was satisfied,” emphasizing its remarkable nature with a count: “Now those who had eaten the loaves were five thousand men.” While the Greek *andres* sometimes means “people,” the sense here is likely “men,” since Matthew adds “. . . besides women and children” (Matt 14:21). This would suggest that upwards of 10,000 people were fed. To indicate just how amazing this was, Mark notes that twelve baskets of leftovers were picked up. The number twelve could be symbolic for the tribes of Israel. But it could also simply be that each of the disciples had a basket. The point is that God’s provision is overwhelming.

The miracle has several important OT precedents. It recalls Elijah’s feeding of 100 prophets with 20 barley loaves in 2 Kings 4:42–44. If this is in view, the point may be that Jesus’s miracle far exceeds that of Elijah.

A second important precedent is Israel's manna in the wilderness. John's Gospel emphasizes this background, as Jesus teaches that he is the bread of life that comes down from heaven ([John 6](#)). Matthew's strong emphasis on Jesus as a new Moses also likely has the wilderness feedings in mind. Mark also seems to highlight this by noting that the place where it happened was a "desert" or "wilderness" place (6:35).

A third important background is the messianic banquet described in [Isaiah 25](#), where God's end-time salvation is described as a great banquet that God will prepare for his people on the mountain of the Lord ([Isa 25:7–8](#)). The feeding miracle thus looks back at God's great deliverance in the Exodus and looks forward to the messianic banquet, God's great end-time salvation.

The famous mosaic of the fish and the loaves from the Multiplication in Tabgha, c. AD 480. | Photo Credit: Thompson, CC BY-SA 4.0

Just as this episode portrays Jesus fulfilling the role of Yahweh feeding his people in the wilderness, so the next episode reveals him making a way through the sea, as he did in the Exodus.

### ***Walking on the Water (6:45–52)***

**6:45** Mark reports that before dismissing the crowd, Jesus sent his disciples ahead of him by boat to Bethsaida. Mark does not tell us the reason for this action, but in John's Gospel we learn that after the feeding miracle the people want to make Jesus king ([John 6:14–15](#)). Jesus's immediate dismissal of the disciples and the crowds may be his way of calming a potentially volatile situation.

**6:46** His primary reason for staying behind was to go up to the mountain to pray. As earlier in Capernaum (1:35), Mark wants to emphasize Jesus's need for time alone with God, the source of his strength and power.

**6:47–48** Later that night, the boat had reached the middle of a lake, but was moving slowly against headwind. Mark says simply, “Very early in the morning he came toward them walking on the sea and wanted to pass by them.” Some skeptics have tried to explain this rationally, suggesting Jesus was actually walking along the shore with his feet shrouded in mist. Mark seems to anticipate this rationalistic explanation by noting that the boat was *in the middle of the lake*. Jesus’s actions here recall OT passages like Job 9:8, where we learn that God alone, “treads on the waves of the sea” (cf Isa 43:16; 51:10; Ps 77:19; Sir 24:5–6). This is clearly meant to be a theophany, a revelation of Jesus’s divine authority. Further evidence for this is Mark’s puzzling statement “and wanted to pass by them.” Was Jesus ignoring the disciples and just taking a walk? More likely, this, too, is the language of theophany. In Exodus 33:18–23, Moses asks the Lord to reveal his glory and God says, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you.” A similar scene occurs in 1 Kings 19:10–12. When Elijah complains that he is the only faithful person left in Israel, God tells him to “stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” So perhaps by “passing by” the disciples, Jesus is in fact revealing his divine glory.

**6:49–50** The disciples are naturally terrified, thinking they are seeing a ghost. They cry out in fear, but Jesus calms them, “Have courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” The phrase, “It is I,” is the Greek *egō eimi*, “I am,” and it is tempting—in light of the theophanic imagery in the context—to identify this with God’s self-revelation as the great “I AM” in Exodus 3:14, or in Yahweh’s expression, “I am he,” throughout Isaiah 40–55 (specifically, Isa 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 46:4; 48:12; 51:12). Certainly, in passages like John 8:58 (“Before Abraham was, I AM”), Jesus’s identity as Yahweh is in view. Yet the normal way to say “It is me” in Greek is *egō eimi*. In the present context, the disciples think they are seeing a ghost, so Jesus assures them it is him.<sup>16</sup>

**6:51–52** Only Matthew’s Gospel includes the account of Peter getting out of the boat and walking toward Jesus. Mark simply reports that Jesus climbed into the boat. The miracles keep coming, however, as the wind immediately stops. Again, Jesus demonstrates divine power to calm the sea. The disciples are “amazed” both at Jesus’s ability to walk on water and to stop the wind. Yet amazement here carries the negative connotation of confusion. Mark explains it was “because they had not understood about the loaves. Instead, their hearts were hardened.” Here we have another potential Exodus allusion, recalling the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart that led to the plagues against Egypt. Hardness of heart was also characteristic of the religious leaders when they earlier sought to trap Jesus (3:5). This is a serious charge. From this point forward we will see an increasingly negative portrayal of the disciples. Will they remain faithful to Jesus or go the way of the religious leaders?

### ***Healings near Gennesaret (6:53–56)***

**6:53** Mark picks up the story after Jesus’s walking on water as he and the disciples land at Gennesaret. Gennesaret is the name of both a fertile plain and a city on the northwestern shore of the lake between Capernaum to the north and Magdala to the south.

The geography here is confusing. The traditional site of the feeding miracle is Tabgha, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Mark says in 6:45 that Jesus sent his disciples toward Bethsaida which is *east* of Tabgha beyond the Jordan River. So it seems they were headed east. But they land at Gennesaret, on the far *western shore*. To add further confusion, Luke says the feeding took place near Bethsaida (9:10). Some have therefore proposed two Bethsaidas. Others claim the disciples headed east but were blown back west.

But there is a simpler solution. If the miracle took place *near* Bethsaida, as Luke says (Luke 9:10), Jesus's instruction in Mark 6:45 may mean they were to prepare the boat and wait for him *at Bethsaida*. If he were delayed, they should go on ahead of him, sailing west toward Gennesaret. Since Jesus *was* delayed, they did sail west, and Jesus caught up with them walking on the water. Together then, they arrive at their original destination—Gennesaret. In short, Bethsaida was not the final destination, but the launching point for their journey.

**6:54–56** What follows is a summary of Jesus's ministry. This is the third such summary in Mark (cf. 1:32–34; 3:7–12). All three stress Jesus's miracles and remarkable popularity.

When Jesus lands, the people recognize him and rush to bring their sick, begging to touch even the end of his cloak. The “end” likely refers to the blue tassels religious Jews wore on their robe (Num 15:38–39; Deut 22:12; cf. Matt 9:20; 23:5; Luke 8:44)—the point being that Jesus is an observant Jew. The reference to healing by touch sounds a bit like magic. Yet we must recall Jesus's words to the woman with the bleeding disorder: “Your *faith* has saved you” (5:34). While Mark wants readers to recognize Jesus's extraordinary power, his authority is not magical, but God's power for the restoration of creation and the kingdom of God.

### ***Commands of God and Human Traditions (7:1–23)***

**7:1–13** This section returns to the theme of conflict with the religious leaders that was characteristic of Jesus's early Galilean ministry (2:1–3:6; 3:20–30). The conflict here concerns Jewish ceremonial law and defilement. A group of religious leaders—perhaps an official delegation from the Sanhedrin—come from Jerusalem to observe Jesus. When they criticize his disciples for not practicing ceremonial washings, Jesus accuses them of hypocrisy, quoting Isaiah 29:13: “These people approach me with their speeches to honor me with lip-service, yet their hearts are far from me. . . .” Jesus then points out that they give lip-service to the law but find creative ways around it. For example, they designate property as *Corban*, meaning “dedicated to God,” so that they do not have to use it to help their aging parents, thus breaking the commandment to honor your parents (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16).



**7:14–23** Jesus then moves on to the issue of ceremonial washings. He makes the astonishing claim that it is not what goes *into* a person that defiles them, but what comes *out*: evil thoughts, immorality, theft, murder, greed, etc. In one sense, this teaching is nothing new. Throughout the OT God condemns those who make an external show of religion but practice evil. On the other hand, this is radically new teaching, since Jesus seems to overrule the ceremonial laws of the OT, where eating certain foods *did* bring defilement (cf. [Lev 11](#)). Mark confirms Jesus’s meaning: “In saying this . . . Jesus declared all foods clean.”

What is Jesus’s point here? Although Jesus certainly emphasizes the true essence of the OT law, he goes even further. The coming of the kingdom of God and the establishment of the new covenant represents *the fulfillment of the law*. From now on the law will be written on the hearts of people through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. The daily sacrifices offered to cover sins will be replaced by Jesus’s once-for-all ransom payment for sins. This is not just the reform of Judaism; it is the dawning of the new age of salvation. In the next episode, this same point will be driven home with reference to salvation for the Gentiles.

### ***The Faith of the Syrophenician Woman (7:24–30)***

**7:24** Jesus now leaves Galilee and heads north into the region of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast. This is the second time Jesus has ventured into Gentile territory (cf. 5:1–20). The previous context of clean and unclean foods is significant, symbolically preparing the way for Jesus’s ministry to Gentiles who were considered unclean by the Jews. This is similar to [Acts 10](#), where Peter’s vision of unclean animals prepares the way for the gospel going to Gentiles.

**7:25–27** Although Jesus has evidently headed north to escape the crowds, his popularity follows him even to Phoenicia. A Syrophenician woman comes and begs him to heal her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus, however, responds, “Let the children be fed first, because it isn’t right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” This is a shocking statement coming from a man of compassion. The “children” represent the people of Israel and the “bread” signifies God’s blessings. “Dog” was a derogatory term used for Gentiles. Jesus’s answer seems rude and arrogant. He rejects the woman’s request and says his healing power is for the Jews.

Yet a closer look reveals that there is more here than meets the eye. For one thing, Jesus says “Let the children be fed *first* . . .” This leaves open the possibility that the dogs will get some bread later. In Matthew’s version, Jesus says, “I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel,” seemingly closing the door to the Gentiles. Second, Jesus uses a diminutive form of dogs, meaning something like “little dogs,” which somewhat softens the insult.

**7:28–30** Despite Jesus’s rebuff, the woman will not take “no” for an answer. She responds “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In other words, once the Jews have partaken of salvation, there should be blessings left for the Gentiles. Jesus is impressed by her answer and says, “Because of this reply, you may go. The demon has left your daughter.” The woman goes home and finds her child lying in bed with the demon gone.

The episode is enormously important for several reasons. First, this is the only time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus loses a debate! By this, we mean that whenever Jesus is verbally challenged by the religious leaders, he comes out on top. Here, however, he concedes that a Gentile woman is right, and he is wrong: The dogs *should* get some of the bread. The woman shows great wisdom in recognizing that God's plan is for the Gentiles to receive God's salvation blessings. Of course, this is no surprise to Jesus. By "playing dumb" and representing the traditional Jewish viewpoint, he provokes the woman to greater faith and to demand what is rightfully hers. By telling this story, Mark reveals that God's plan of salvation is for all people—Jews and Gentiles alike.

### ***Healing a Deaf and Mute Man (7:31–37)***

**7:31** Jesus's ministry in Gentile territory continues as Jesus leaves the region of Tyre, passes through the city of Sidon, down to the sea of Galilee, and then into the Decapolis. Since Sidon is north of Tyre, some commentators have accused Mark of confusion about Palestinian geography. But that is only true if Mark intends a straight-line journey. More likely, he is summarizing Jesus's travels: first north through Sidon, then southeast past the Sea of Galilee and into the Decapolis. The key point is that Jesus has moved from one Gentile territory into another.

**7:32–34** Here in the Decapolis, some people bring a deaf person, who is also unable to speak well. This probably means the speech difficulties characteristic of the deaf. They beg Jesus to touch the man and heal him. Jesus takes the man away from the crowd to perform the healing in private. No reason for this is stated, although it is consistent with the "messianic secret" found throughout Mark (see [Introduction](#)). The healing is described in great detail: Jesus touches the man's tongue, spits, looks up to heaven, sighs deeply, and speaks the Aramaic word, *Ephphatha*, which means in Aramaic "Be opened!" Most of these actions are quite easy to explain: Jesus often touches people to heal them, a sign of compassion and also evidence of his messianic authority to heal. Jesus's deep sigh and his look toward heaven both likely indicate prayer. Jesus is acting in full dependence on the Father. The strangest part is the spitting. Actually, three times in the Gospels Jesus uses saliva or spit to heal: (cf. [Mark 8:23](#); [John 9:6](#)). In the ancient world, spittle was commonly viewed as having medicinal or magical powers.<sup>17</sup>

Both the deep groan and the use of spit are sometimes viewed as magic. But elsewhere Jesus's healings are linked to his own authority as the Messiah and Son of God, not to spells or incantation. Indeed, the word used here of the man's muteness appears only once elsewhere in the Greek Bible (LXX), in [Isaiah 35:6](#). There it describes the restoration of creation: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and the mute shout for joy. Mark seems to be deliberately echoing this passage: Jesus's healings are signs of the inauguration of the kingdom of God.

**7:35–37** At Jesus’s command the man is immediately healed. Jesus again commands silence. This is somewhat surprising, since the last time Jesus was in the Decapolis—when he healed the man with legion of demons—he told the man to proclaim what had happened to him (5:19). Why does he command silence? Mark does not say. Perhaps Jesus’s reputation had grown so much that even in the Decapolis there was a danger they would try to make him king. Or perhaps Jesus needs privacy in order to continue to train his disciples.

But in any case, as with the man healed of leprosy in 1:45, the secret is not kept. The more Jesus insists on silence, the more people talk. Mark’s point seems to be that some secrets are so amazing they just cannot be kept. As throughout Jesus’s Galilean ministry, the twin themes of amazement and popularity dominate Mark’s Gospel. Mark wants to demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God.

### ***Feeding the Four Thousand (8:1-10)***

**8:1a** The account of the feeding of the 4,000 is introduced with the phrase, “In those days there was again a large crowd.” “Those days” seems to refer to the healing of the deaf man in Decapolis, implying that the feeding miracle also occurs in the Decapolis, predominantly Gentile territory. This might help to explain why Mark recounts two feeding miracles. While the feeding of the 5,000 indicates salvation blessings for the Jews, the 4,000 may indicate the expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles.

**8:1b–5** Jesus approaches the disciples and expresses his compassion for the crowds. They have been with him for three days, and he is concerned that they will collapse on the way home. The disciples respond negatively, “Where can anyone get enough bread here in this desolate place to feed these people?” This pessimism seems unfathomable after they have witnessed the first feeding miracle. Some commentators have tried to suggest rationale, such as that the crowds have been there longer or that the place was more remote. But it is better to view their question from the perspective of Mark’s narrative theology. In the narrative that follows, the disciples will express increasing spiritual dullness. As Mark said in 6:52: “They had not understood about the loaves. Instead, their hearts were hardened.”

**8:6–9a** The miracle is described in a manner very similar to the first one: Jesus tells the crowds to sit down; he takes the bread, gives thanks, and breaks it (in very eucharistic-sounding language). Then he gives it to the disciples, who distribute it to the crowd. He does the same with the fish. In nearly identical words, Mark says, “They ate and were satisfied.” Only the numbers are different: instead of 5,000 fed with five loaves and two fish, and 12 baskets left over, 4,000 are fed with seven loaves and a few fish, with seven baskets left over. While the first miracle mentioned 5,000 *men*, this one mentions only the number 4,000, which could be the total number. It seems unlikely that the smaller number is meant to indicate in any sense diminishing crowds. Four thousand is still a massive crowd fed with a few provisions. More amazing is the fact that the feeding miracle was not a one-off event Jesus apparently can perform this miracle at will.

**8:9b–10** As with the first feeding miracle, Jesus takes time to send the crowd away. He then gets in the boat and proceeds to the region of Dalmanutha. This place is unknown and does not appear elsewhere in Jewish literature. Since Jesus is met there by Pharisees, it is likely in Jewish territory on the western shore of the lake. Some manuscripts read “Magadon,” which is also unknown. Others read “Magdala,” a town on the western shore north of Tiberias—the hometown of Mary Magdalene. Just as puzzling as the name is the encounter Jesus has with the religious leaders there.

***Request for a Sign and the Yeast of the Pharisees and Herod (8:11–21)***

When Jesus lands in Dalmanutha, he is approached by a group of Pharisees, who ask him for a sign from heaven. Jesus “sighing deeply,” says, “Why does this generation demand a sign? Truly I tell you no sign will be given to this generation.” Mark then reports that Jesus gets back into the boat and crosses to the other side.

This is a strange incident. Jesus crosses the sea, says two sentences to the religious leaders; turns around, and crosses back. In Mark’s narrative, the passage brings the religious leaders back into the picture and prepares for the next passage, where Jesus will speak of the “leaven of the Pharisees.”

**8:11** The “sign from heaven” that the Pharisees request may be a request for an apocalyptic sign in the skies, such as stars falling from the sky or the moon turning red (cf. [Isa 13:10](#); [34:4](#); [Mark 13:24–25](#); [Rev 6:12](#)). Or, “heaven” may be a circumlocution for “God,” and they are asking for a sign from God that Jesus is the Messiah.

**8:12** Jesus “sighs deeply” (cf. 7:34), this time probably evidence of his deep frustration, and refuses their request. He has already revealed the power and presence of the kingdom of God through his miracles and exorcisms, and they have refused to believe. Jesus’s response begins with the formula, “Truly I tell you” (*amēn legō humin*). This phrase appears thirteen times in Mark, introducing important and authoritative statements. Jesus concludes, “No sign will be given to this generation.” They have had their chance. They have seen the power of the kingdom in Jesus’s miracles and have decisively rejected it.

**8:13** Jesus then gets back into the boat and crosses to the other side. What happens next represents a critical moment for the disciples.

**8:14–15** Mark begins by noting that the disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf. Jesus, with his mind still on the encounter with the Pharisees, warns them, “Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” Yeast or leaven is what makes bread rise and is often used in Scripture of the pervasive power of sin (cf. [1Cor 5:6](#)). In his parallel, Matthew identifies the leaven as the “teaching” of the Pharisees and the Sadducees ([Matt 16:11–12](#)), and Luke refers to it as their “hypocrisy” ([Luke 12:1](#)). Mark does not say but also refers to the leaven of Herod. This is odd since Herod and the Pharisees had little in common ([see comments on 3:6](#)). What they do share, however, is their opposition to Jesus and to the kingdom of God.

**8:16–18** The disciples, meanwhile, are confused by the leaven analogy. They think Jesus is angry because they do not have enough bread. Jesus responds, “Why are you discussing the fact you have no bread? Don’t you understand or comprehend? Do you have hardened hearts? Do you have eyes and not see; do you have ears and not hear?” These words are similar to [Jeremiah 5:21](#) and [Ezekiel 12:2](#), but also recall Jesus’s words in 4:11–12, where he applies [Isaiah 6:9–10](#) to the spiritual blindness of the religious leaders. The disciples seem dangerously close to becoming like them.

**8:19–21** Jesus seeks to bring them back by reminding them of the two feeding miracles, asking how many baskets were leftover in each case. Jesus’s point is that through these amazing miracles, he has been demonstrating the abundant power and presence of the kingdom of God. Jesus concludes, “Don’t you understand yet?” That will be the decisive question over the next three chapters, as the disciples struggle with pride, misunderstanding, and unbelief.

### ***Healing a Blind Man at Bethsaida (8:22–26)***

This episode is transitional. On the one hand, it concludes the three boat trips, each of which highlighted the struggling faith of the disciples. On the other hand, it is the first of two episodes involving the healing of a blind man which frames Mark’s central section from 8:22 to 10:52. We will call this section “the way of the cross” because of its critical role in Mark’s Christology and his theology of discipleship.

The episode begins with Jesus and the disciples arriving at Bethsaida and some people bringing a blind man to Jesus to heal. There are striking parallels between this miracle and the healing of a deaf man in 7:31–37. In both, the man is brought by people who plead with Jesus to touch and heal him. In both, Jesus takes the man away and heals him in private, using spit. In both, Jesus commands silence afterward. This episode is unique, however, in that Jesus heals the man in two stages. After touching him the first time, Jesus asks whether he can see anything, and the man responds, “I see people — they look like trees walking.” Shockingly, the healing only half works! Jesus apparently must fine-tune his cure by putting his hands on the man’s eyes a second time. This time, the man’s sight is fully restored.

What is happening here? Does Jesus miss the mark with his first attempt? This would be very odd in a Gospel where Mark so emphatically asserts Jesus’s divine authority. A better explanation comes from what happens next. In the following episode, Peter will acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah but will not comprehend his suffering role. In other words, he “sees,” but only partially. It seems likely, then, that Mark puts this episode of partial healing before Peter’s confession to symbolize the partial sight of the disciples. It is not until after the resurrection that they will comprehend that Jesus’s death was essential for his messianic role.

## **Part II: The Suffering Way of the Messiah**

With Peter's confession in chapter 8, we reach the center-point of Mark's Gospel. Up to this point, the primary emphasis has been on Jesus's messianic authority. From this point on the emphasis will be the road to the cross.

### ***Peter's Confession and the First Passion Prediction (8:27-33)***

**8:27-29** This episode takes place near the city of Caesarea Philippi, north of Galilee. Jesus takes his disciples there to get away from the crowds. On the way he asks them a crucial question, "Who do people say that I am?" They reply with the popular speculations: John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. Jesus then turns to the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" As so often, Peter speaks for the others: "You are the Messiah!"

**8:30-31** Jesus evidently accepts this acclamation but commands them to tell no one. In what follows we apparently finally get the reason for this "messianic secret" (see [Introduction](#)), Jesus needs to redefine the Messiah's role: "Then he began to teach them that it was necessary for the Son of Man suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and rise after three days."

**8:32** Although Jesus "spoke openly about this," Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him. Peter evidently thinks that Jesus is being pessimistic. From Peter's perspective, Jesus will go to Jerusalem and declare himself to be Messiah. A messianic war will break out, and Jesus will be crowned king. But Jesus is evidently getting cold feet, thinking he will lose. Peter rebukes him for such a defeatist attitude.

**8:33** But Peter has misunderstood Jesus's words. Jesus is not speaking of defeat in a messianic war with Rome, but rather of giving himself as an atoning sacrifice for sins, fulfilling the role of the suffering servant of [Isaiah 53](#). This is his messianic task. Jesus, therefore, rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You are not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns."

*Why does Jesus call Peter "Satan"?*

For Jesus to avoid the cross would be to fail in God's plan to bring salvation to humankind. Jesus says, "That is Satan's idea, not God's." He also says that Peter has in mind "merely human concerns." The leaders of Israel wanted to see Rome defeated and their own kingdom restored. Jesus instead called them to repentance and submission to God's kingdom. The Messiah was not here simply to establish Israel's kingdom, but to restore creation and to bring all humanity back into a right relationship with their creator God.

Peter's confession marks a key turning point in Mark's narrative. Here for the first time, one of Jesus's disciples acknowledges that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. But he does not yet understand the Messiah's role. Like the blind man in the episode just before this, he sees only partially. From this point on Jesus will have his eyes on the cross, teaching his disciples the true meaning of servant leadership.

### ***Requirements of Discipleship (8:34–9:1)***

Following Peter's confession and Jesus's first prediction of his suffering and death, Jesus sets out the costs and consequences of discipleship. As we have seen, Mark is fond of groups of three, and this is the first of three triads that emphasize Jesus's Messianic role. Three times Jesus predicts his death (8:31; 9:30–31; 10:32–34). Each time the disciples respond with some act of pride, ignorance, or self-interest (8:32; 9:33–34; 10:35–41). Jesus then calls them together and teaches them about the nature of true servant leadership (8:34–38; 9:35–37; 10:42–45). These three triads will climax at Mark 10:45, which is often considered the theme verse of Mark's Gospel: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

**8:34** The present passage is in the middle of the first triad. Jesus has predicted his coming suffering and death, and Peter has responded by rebuking Jesus. Jesus now corrects Peter by teaching about the cost of discipleship, which is to "deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." Denying yourself does not just mean living a life of self-denial or discipline. In the first century, carrying your cross meant heading to a slow and excruciating death. To be Jesus's disciple means to give up everything for him. Of course, for most believers, this will not mean martyrdom. But it does mean a full commitment to the kingdom of God. In Luke's version of the saying, Jesus says to "take up your cross *daily*" (Luke 9:23).

**8:35–37** From the cost of discipleship, Jesus moves on to its consequences. He makes a play on words with the Greek word *psychē*, which can refer to physical or spiritual life ("life" or "soul"): "For whoever wants to save his life [*psychē* = physical life] will lose it [=their soul], but whoever loses his life because of me and the gospel will save it." Jesus continues by emphasizing the value of spiritual life: "For what does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his life?" Even if one lives a life of wealth, prosperity, and happiness, their sojourn on earth is just a moment compared to eternity. Eternal life has eternal value: "What can anyone give in exchange for his life?"

**8:38** The second consequence of loyalty or disloyalty to the gospel relates to the honor/shame culture of the first century. Jesus says, "For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." In Mark's day, believers were often viewed with shame and suspicion because they did not participate in pagan festivals or honor the gods of Rome. Yet all that will be reversed, Jesus says, when the Son of Man comes to save and to judge. (On the coming Son of Man, see Dan 7:13–14 and the discussion above at 2:1–12.)

**9:1** The last line in this passage is the most difficult. Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come in power.” What does this mean? If Jesus meant his second coming, he was mistaken, since he did not return before that first generation died off. There are several other possible interpretations. Some say Jesus meant the present manifestation of the kingdom which was arriving through his words and deeds. Others say this refers to Jesus’s death, resurrection, and ascension, or perhaps the pouring out of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, which inaugurated the new covenant. Others suggest that Jesus is alluding to the destruction of Jerusalem AD 70, which was a preview of the second coming.

The most likely view, however, is that Jesus is referring to the transfiguration, which will occur in just a few days and will be a preview of the glory of the kingdom. Only a few who are standing there—Peter, James, and John—will witness this. The biggest problem with this interpretation is that the statement “some standing here . . . will not taste death” seems odd since it is unlikely *any* of the disciples would die in the next few days. But the phrase could mean that these few will see the kingdom “already *in this life*, rather than in the life to come.”<sup>18</sup> Although most believers will experience the kingdom after death at the final resurrection, these three would see it before they taste death.

### ***The Transfiguration and the Question about Elijah (9:2-13)***

**9:2** Mark introduces the transfiguration account with a time reference—something rare in Mark—saying that the event occurred six days later. This may support the view that Jesus’s reference to the kingdom “coming in power” (9:1) is pointing forward to the transfiguration.

Mark does not tell us where the transfiguration occurred, only that it was on a high mountain. The traditional site is Mount Tabor, on the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley in lower Galilee. Yet Mount Tabor is less than 2,000 feet or 575 meters high, not really a “high mountain.” A more likely suggestion is Mount Hermon in the far north, the highest mountain in Israel, towering higher than 9,000 feet or 2,800 meters. Hermon is also located near Caesarea Philippi, the site of Peter’s confession.

**9:3–8** What is important for Mark is not the specific location but the mountaintop revelation. The account is full of allusions to Israel’s sojourn at Mount Sinai. Jesus’s glowing appearance recalls Moses’s in [Exodus 34:29](#); God speaks through an over-shadowing cloud as he did in [Exodus 24:16](#); the people are in awe at the return of both Jesus (9:15) and Moses ([Exod 35:30](#)); the mention of six days recalls [Exodus 24:15–16](#), where God spoke six days after the cloud settled on the mountain

*Why do Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus at the Transfiguration?*



A variety of suggested parallels have been offered. (1) They may represent the OT Law and the Prophets. This is possible, but we might expect one of the writing prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah, rather than Elijah. (2) Both were powerful and heroic figures in Israel's history. (3) Both had mountaintop revelations ([Exod 34](#); [1Kgs 18, 19](#)). (4) Both faced severe opposition from their contemporaries. (5) Both had unusual departures from life. Moses died on Mount Nebo and was buried by God himself, while Elijah ascended to heaven in a whirlwind ([Deut 34:5-6](#); [2Kgs 2:11](#)). (6) Both also came to be associated with the end times. [Deuteronomy 18:15](#) speak of a "prophet like Moses" who will one day come, and [Malachi 3:1](#) and [4:6](#) predicts Elijah's return before the great Day the Lord. It could be any or all of these reasons. What is clear is that their presence confirms Jesus's role as fulfillment of the OT prophecies and as God's agent of salvation.

Mounts Tabor (left) and Gilboa (right) as viewed from Carmel. | Photo Credit: Phil Thompson, CC BY-SA

There has been much speculation about the meaning of Peter's comment: "Let's set up three shelters . . ." Do these represent the feast of tabernacles? Were they shrines to honor the three? In the end, it does not really matter, since Peter spoke because "he did not know what to say." The comment, in other words, was irrelevant. Far more important is the voice from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him!" The words are similar to those at Jesus's baptism ([see comments at 1:11](#)), but these are directed to the disciples and contain an additional allusion to [Deuteronomy 18:15](#), where Moses tells the Israelites that God will raise up a "prophet like me" from among their fellow Israelites and that, "You must listen to him."

**9:9–13** As the group is coming down from the mountain, Jesus reiterates the messianic secret (see [Introduction](#)), commanding the disciples to keep silent about the transfiguration until after his resurrection. The point seems to be that the disciples must not proclaim Jesus as the Messiah until he has fulfilled his suffering role. The disciples also asked Jesus why the scribes say that Elijah must come first. There was much speculation about Elijah’s eschatological role in Judaism, based on the prophecies of [Malachi 3:1](#) and 4:6. Jesus responds that Elijah will indeed come to restore all things, but then qualifies this: First, the restoration that this Elijah will announce will be accomplished not by the Messiah’s conquest, but by his suffering as the Son of Man. Second, Elijah has already come “and they did whatever they pleased to him.” Jesus is of course referring to John the Baptist, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah ([Luke 1:17; 3:4](#)) and who suffered martyrdom for his faithful witness.

Mount Hermon as viewed from the road to Nimrod Forest National Park. | Photo Credit: Phil Thompson, CC BY-SA

### ***Healing a Boy with an Evil Spirit (9:14–29)***

**9:14–15** As Jesus and his three disciples approach the rest of the disciples, they see a group of teachers of the law arguing with them. Meanwhile, the crowd sees Jesus and runs to him, “amazed. Why they were amazed is not clear. Maybe they have been anxiously waiting for him, hoping to see healing. Or perhaps they are in awe because he still has the glow of the mountain on him.

**9:16–18** When Jesus asks what they are arguing about, a man steps forward and says that his son is demon-possessed, but the disciples have been unable to help. The symptoms of demon possession are remarkably similar to epilepsy, and some have claimed that this is simply a misdiagnosis of that disease. Yet the Gospels and other ancient literature do commonly distinguish between disease and demon possession, and accounts of demon possession often include disease-like symptoms.

**9:19** Jesus responds to the situation with a stinging rebuke, “You unbelieving generation . . . How long will I be with you? How long must I put up with you?” It is not clear whether this is directed against the religious leaders or the disciples. The likely answer is *both*. Although the religious leaders have been Jesus’s consistent opponents, throughout this section Mark will emphasize the failures of the disciples.

**9:20–24** When Jesus says to bring the boy to him, the demon throws him into convulsions. The father begs Jesus, “But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus responds by repeating the man’s statement, “If you can?” The point is, “Of course I can, but do *you* have enough faith in me to believe this will happen?” Jesus’s statement provokes the man to greater faith. “I do believe,” he says, “help my unbelief!” This powerful statement expresses the true essence of faith, which is recognizing one’s inabilities and trusting in God instead.

**9:25–27** When Jesus sees a crowd gathering, he commands the demon to come out. The spirit convulses the boy so violently that it leaves him motionless. Some assume the boy has died, but Jesus takes him by the hand and lifts him up, restoring him to his father.

**9:28–29** The episode concludes with the disciples asking why they had failed to cast the demon out. Jesus responds, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer.” The point is not that this is a type of demon possession that needs a special prayer or incantation. Rather, Jesus’s point is the necessity of praying in faith. Prayer means dependence on God and trust in him.

**“Prayer means  
dependence on God  
and trust in him.”**

#### ***Second Passion Prediction and Teaching on Discipleship (9:30–50)***

As noted above, this is the second of three episodes that follow the same pattern: Jesus predicts his death; the disciples demonstrate pride or self-interest; and Jesus teaches on the nature of true servant leadership (see [comments on 8:34–9:1](#)).

**9:30–31** The episode begins with one of Mark’s clearest explanations for the purpose of the messianic secret (see [Introduction](#)). Jesus is seeking to keep their location secret, “For he was teaching his disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after he is killed, he will rise three days later.”” Jesus does not want his messiahship announced until he can define for the disciples the Messiah’s suffering role.

**9:32–34** The disciples, however, are not getting it: “But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask him.” Their failure is exacerbated when they arrive in Capernaum and Jesus asks, “What were you arguing about on the way?” The disciples are embarrassed to respond because they were debating which of them was the greatest. For a second time, Jesus’s passion prediction is followed by ignorance and pride.

**9:35–37** Once again Jesus takes time for a lesson on servant leadership. Jesus gathers the Twelve and says to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be last and servant of all.” This is shocking language in a culture where social status was everything. But in the upside-down values of the kingdom of God, it is those who *serve*, who will ultimately lead. Taking a child in his arms, Jesus continues: “Whoever welcomes one little child such as this in my name welcomes me.” Children in first-century culture had essentially no social status. But Jesus says they are worthy to be welcomed as you would an honored guest.

**9:38–42** What follows is more teaching around this theme of honoring others. First, the disciple John reports that they saw someone driving out demons in Jesus’s name and tried to stop him. John thinks he is protecting the Jesus brand. But Jesus says not to stop him, since “For whoever is not against us is for us.” What is important is not individual power and position but the advancement of the kingdom of God. Service for others should be our highest priority. On the positive side, those who give a cup of water to those who belong to the Messiah will be rewarded. On the negative side, “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to fall away — it would be better for him a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.” Severe judgment awaits those who hurt the humble servants of the kingdom of God.

**9:43–48** Jesus says drastic measures should be taken to prevent this. Speaking with hyperbole he says, “And if your hand causes you to fall away, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell, the unquenchable fire.” The same is true of your foot or your eye. Jesus, of course, is not encouraging people to maim themselves. He is rather emphasizing the eternal value of the kingdom of God in contrast to the temporal values of power and position.

**9:49–50** Jesus ends his teaching with three sayings linked loosely together around the metaphor of salt. The first picks up the theme of testing: “For everyone will be salted with fire.” Since salt was a preserving agent, this likely means that everyone will pass through trials that will test their faith. The second salt saying is that “Salt is good, but if the salt should lose its flavor, how can you season it?” Jesus is encouraging his followers not to lose the values of the kingdom that bring transformation to the world. Finally, the third salt saying is, “Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.” Sharing salt is a symbol of fellowship around a meal, so Jesus is likely calling his followers to peace and fellowship with one another.

### ***Teaching on Divorce (10:1–12)***

This passage may at first sight seem out of place, since Mark returns to the theme of conflict with the religious leaders. Since chapter 8, Jesus has been primarily focused on teaching the Twelve. But, in fact, the rest of chapter 10 will focus on the radical values of the kingdom with reference to marriage (10:1–12), children (10:13–16) and wealth (10:17–31).

**10:1–2** The episode begins with Jesus’s travels into Judea and across the Jordan River. Mark does not say why he journeyed here, but it may have been to escape the crowds or the religious leaders. If so it was not successful, as Mark reports that both the crowds and some Pharisees find him there

The Pharisees raise a question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” This issue of the grounds for divorce was debated by the rabbis. The more conservative view of the school of Shammai claimed that a man could divorce his wife only if she were unfaithful. The more liberal school of Hillel claimed that divorce was acceptable for almost any reason (*m. Gittin* 9:10).

**10:3–4** As so often, Jesus answers a question with a question, “What did Moses command you?” Alluding to [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#), they respond that Moses permitted a man to write his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away. In fact, [Deuteronomy 24](#) is not about grounds for divorce; is about protecting a wife from exploitation after a man divorces her. But the religious leaders view this passage as justification for divorce.

**10:5–9** Jesus disagrees: “He wrote this command for you because of the hardness of your hearts.” In other words, divorce was never part of God’s design and occurs because of sinful human hearts. Jesus then takes them back to first principles, quoting from [Genesis 1:27](#) and 2:24: “But from the beginning of creation ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and the two will become one flesh.’” Jesus concludes, “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” Jesus here challenges the cavalier attitude of the Pharisees towards divorce. This was never God’s design for marriage.

**10:10–12** Later, when his disciples ask Jesus privately about this, he goes even further, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.” This is shocking in that cultural context. Whereas the religious leaders were saying you could divorce for almost any reason. Jesus says, “If you do divorce, it is like committing adultery.” The command against adultery was one of the Ten Commandments ([Exod 20:14](#)) and adultery was punishable by death ([Lev 20:10](#)). What the religious leaders say is “no big deal,” Jesus says is a capital crime!

### *What Does Jesus Teach about Divorce?*

In [Mark 10:1–12](#), Jesus is not talking about the “grounds” for divorce. He is shocking his hearers concerning its seriousness. It is actually Matthew’s version of the saying that is often used to establish grounds for divorce. In [Matthew 19:9](#) Jesus says, “And I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” But Jesus does not say that sexual immorality makes divorce acceptable or that people can escape blame if adultery has happened. He just says that if a wife has committed adultery, the man’s divorce is not itself adultery. This is perhaps because the marriage bond has already been broken.

The important point here is that divorce is always contrary to God’s purpose for marriage. God desires his people to live in harmony and be reconciled when they have differences. To be sure, there are times when divorce is inevitable and even necessary (as in the case of abuse). But this is because of hard human hearts. When it happens, both parties should turn back to God in repentance and self-examination. And then they should move forward in humility, committing themselves to glorify God in all their relationships.

### ***Blessing the Children (10:13–16)***

In this short episode, Jesus continues to demonstrate the upside-down values of the kingdom of God. When some people attempt to bring their children to Jesus to bless them, the disciples turn them away. In the first century world, children were generally considered to be irrelevant, with little social status. This does not mean that parents did not love their children and cherish them. But there was little emphasis on child development or the special needs of children. From the disciples' perspective they are simply an annoyance.

Yet this is not Jesus's perspective. He becomes *indignant* and responds, "Let the little children come to me. Don't stop them, because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." As so often, Jesus reaches out to the lowly and the vulnerable. What does it mean that "the kingdom of God belongs to such as these"? We often think of children as pure or innocent. But, as noted above, in the first-century children were generally considered insignificant and without social status. Child mortality was high, and children of poverty were vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. When Jesus says you must become like one of these children to enter the kingdom of God, he almost certainly means you must become dependent on God. This is a call to faith.

### ***Riches and the Kingdom of God (10:17-31)***

This passage continues the theme of discipleship that is central to this section (8:27–10:52). It also forms an important supplement to the previous episode. There we saw the necessity of childlike faith and dependence on God. Here we see wealth as a hindrance to that faith.

**10:17–18** As Jesus is starting on his way, a man runs to him and falls on his knees. Mark does not tell us anything about the man, although later we will learn he is very rich (10:22). The episode is often called the "rich young ruler," but this description is pieced together from the three Synoptics. Only Matthew says he was young (Matt 19:20, 22) and only Luke refers to him as a "ruler" (*archōn*, Luke 18:18).

The man asks Jesus a profoundly important question, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Instead of answering the question, Jesus first challenges the way the man addresses him. "Why do you call me good?" Jesus asks, "No one is good except God alone." At first sight, this might seem like Jesus is denying that he is God. But this misses the point. It would never have occurred to this man that Jesus—a Jewish rabbi from Nazareth—was claiming to be God. Rather, Jesus begins by challenging the man's conception of goodness.

**10:19–21a** Jesus then responds, "You know the commandments" and quotes what is essentially the second half of the Ten Commandments, which concern people's relationships with others (cf. Exod 20:12–17; Deut 5:16–21). The man is ready with an answer, "Teacher, I have kept all these from my youth." As far as he's concerned, he has lived a righteous life. Mark, then, notes that before Jesus answered, he looked at the man and loved him. Why this comment? What Jesus is about to say is going to discourage the man and cause him to turn away. Mark wants to make it clear that Jesus did this out of love, not anger or spite.

**10:21b–24a** “You lack one thing,” Jesus says, “Go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” The man is bewildered. His face fell and he went away sad, because—as Mark says—he had great wealth. Jesus concludes, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” The disciples are “amazed” at this since wealth was generally viewed as a blessing from God.

**10:24b–27** But Jesus repeats his words even more emphatically, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” and adds a shocking analogy: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” The camel was the largest land animal in the Middle East, and a needle’s eye was the smallest hole imaginable. Some commentators have tried to soften Jesus’s words, claiming that there was a gate in Jerusalem known as the “Needle’s Eye Gate,” which a camel could get through only with great difficulty. But this is a myth. The earliest reference to such a gate comes from a commentary 1,000 years after the time of Christ!<sup>12</sup>

What Jesus means is what he says: It is *impossible* for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God—while trusting in his riches. This is clear from what follows. When the disciples asked, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus answers “With man it is impossible, but not with God, because all things are possible with God.” Only faith in God can bring salvation. As Jesus said at the beginning, “No one is good except God alone.” No one can earn their salvation.

**10:28–31** The episode ends with a comment by Peter and Jesus’s response. Peter points out that they have left everything to follow him. Jesus responds that those who have given up everything will receive eternal life in the age to come. But more than that, in the present age they will receive one hundred times as much, including homes and fields, brothers and sisters, parents and children—as well as persecution. By becoming followers of Jesus, they have become part of the worldwide family of God and all the resources of the world are theirs! This is an amazing reversal and a whole new way of looking at wealth. As Jesus concludes, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

### ***Third Prediction of the Passion and the Request of James and John (10:32–45)***

This is the third triad where Jesus predicts his death, the disciples demonstrate pride, and Jesus teaches on servant leadership ([see comments on 8:34–9:1](#)).

**10:32** For the first time, Mark mentions Jesus’s Jerusalem destination. He also notes a change in Jesus’s demeanor. He is out in front leading the disciples, which astonishes the disciples (a rabbi normally walked beside disciples). Mark adds that others were afraid, fear likely provoked by the thought of coming war with Rome if Jesus is declared the Messiah.

**10:33–34** For a third time, now, Jesus predicts his coming death. This is the most comprehensive of the three passion predictions, including not just the betrayal and death, but also the role of the Gentiles and the physical abuse Jesus will experience.

**10:35–38** As with the first two predictions, Jesus’s disciples respond with ignorance and pride. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come to Jesus and request the best seats on his right and left “in your glory.” They are no doubt referring to his glorious messianic throne in Jerusalem, not heavenly glory. Jesus dismisses the request, “You don’t know what you’re asking. Are you able to drink the cup I drink or to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” The cup and baptism here represent the great suffering and trial that Jesus is about to face. In the OT, God’s judgment is often described as a cup of wine that causes people or nations to get drunk and collapse (Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15; Ezek 23:32; Hab 2:16). Baptism similarly refers to a coming deluge or flood.

**10:39–40** James and John are not deterred. They no doubt are thinking of the messianic war that is coming and are ready to engage in the battle. “We can!” they say. Jesus responds, “You will drink the cup I drink”—likely meaning that they indeed will suffer. But then he adds, “But to sit at my right or left is not mine to give; instead, it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” Jesus refuses to usurp the Father’s authority.

**10:41–42a** At this point the other ten disciples come into the picture. They have heard James and John’s request and are indignant—no doubt angry because they wanted those front row seats! Again the disciples are failing miserably, and again Jesus gathers them for a lesson on servant leadership.

**10:42b–45** “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them.” The world’s model of leadership is based on power and control. But “But it is not so among you,” Jesus says. “On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all.” This is a radical teaching. A slave in the first century had no rights. They were simply property. They existed for the good of the master. But Jesus says to lead you must become like them. Jesus then points the ultimate example of this: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” This sentence in Mark 10:45 represents the climax to this passage and the climax of the central section of 8:27–10:52. It is often viewed as epitomizing the whole of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus is the ultimate servant leader. Although he is the mighty and powerful Messiah, the Son of Man, he came not for himself but for the good of others to offer himself as an atoning sacrifice for their sins. This verse alludes to Isaiah 53:11–12, where the suffering Servant will “justify the many” and bear “the sin of many.” Jesus is the ultimate servant leader, who calls his disciples to follow in his path.

### ***Restoring Blind Bartimaeus’s Sight (10:46–52)***



The healing of a blind man is the last episode in Mark's Gospel before Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. It also forms an *inclusio*, or bookend structure, with the healing of the blind man in [Mark 8:22–26](#). As we have seen, that episode—in which the man's sight is at first only partially restored—symbolizes the partial sight of the disciples. Although they recognize that Jesus is the Messiah, they fail to grasp his suffering role. We have called the section that follows (8:31–10:45) the “way of the cross,” since Jesus three times predicts his coming death and defines the true meaning of discipleship. Now, following the climax in 10:45, Mark recounts another healing of a blind man. This healing frames the whole section on discipleship and prepares the way for Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem as the Messiah.

**10:46–47** Mark begins by noting that Jesus and his disciples arrive in Jericho. Jericho is located about seventeen miles northeast of Jerusalem, so the informed reader knows that Jesus is getting close to the city. As usual, the disciples and a large crowd are accompanying Jesus.

The blind man, Bartimaeus, hears that Jesus of Nazareth is nearby, so he begins to shout, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” The cry is surprising since prior to this Mark has not mentioned Jesus' Davidic ancestry. While both Matthew and Luke provide genealogies identifying Jesus as a descendant of David, Mark has said nothing. This episode, however, confirms that Mark knows and believes that Jesus is a legitimate heir to David's throne (cf. 12:35–37).

**10:48–52** As we have seen in Mark's narrative, crowds can indicate popularity or function as an obstacle (cf. 2:4). Here they rebuke Bartimaeus and try to silence him. Yet Bartimaeus is persistent and keeps crying out until Jesus hears. As in the case of the four friends (2:1–12) and the Syrophenician woman (7:24–40), persevering faith pays off. When Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” “Rabboni,” the blind man said to him, “I want to see.” Jesus responds, “Go, your faith has saved you,” and the man instantly sees. The episode concludes by noting that Bartimaeus followed Jesus along the road. This is the language of discipleship. The appropriate response to Jesus's healing touch is to follow him.

The Bartimaeus episode shows that those with eyes of faith recognize Jesus as the Messiah. The episode also prepares the way for Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem, where the crowds will cry out “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”

### ***The Triumphal Entry (11:1–11)***

Jesus's approach to Jerusalem riding on a donkey marks a key turning point in Mark's Gospel. While Jesus has sought to keep his messiahship a secret throughout most of his ministry, his actions here publicly proclaim it. The messianic secret is over (see [Introduction](#)), and the Messiah is about to confront Jerusalem and its leaders.

**11:1–7** Jesus sends two of his disciples into one of the villages with specific instructions. When they enter, they will find a colt of a donkey, which has never been ridden, tied there. They are to untie it and bring it to him. If anyone asks why they are doing this, they are to say, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here right away.” It is not clear whether “the Lord needs it” means “God needs it,” “Jesus needs it.” It is also uncertain whether Jesus arranged ahead of time to have the colt ready, or whether he knew by divine knowledge where it would be. In either case, he is clearly acting intentionally. This is important since his entrance represents the fulfillment of [Zechariah 9:9](#): “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout in triumph, Daughter Jerusalem! Look, your King is coming to you; he is righteous and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Jesus is intentionally announcing his messiahship through his symbolic actions.

**11:8–10** As Jesus is approaching the city, people begin to spread their cloaks and branches on the road, preparing a kind of royal path for Jesus. Those going ahead and those following begin to shout “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” The first two lines of this are from [Psalm 118:26](#) which was one of the Hallel or praise Psalms used in the feasts of tabernacles and Passover. It was originally a blessing for Jewish pilgrims (i.e., “those who come in the name of the Lord”) approaching the temple. Hosanna means “save us now” but had come to be used as a shout of praise.

“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David,” is not an OT quote, but represents a cry for hope in the restoration of the dynasty of David and the kingdom of Israel. In this context it is not clear whether the crowds are simply expressing hope for the kingdom or are referring specifically to Jesus as king. The other Gospels are more explicit: [Matthew 21:9](#) has “Hosanna to the *son of David*.” [Luke 19:38](#) has “Blessed is *the King who comes . . .*” and [John 12:13](#) has “Blessed is. . . *the King of Israel!*” Certainly, for Mark’s readers, who have just heard Bartimaeus cry out to Jesus as “Son of David,” there is no doubt that Jesus is entering Jerusalem as the Messiah from David’s line.

Jesus’s intentional fulfillment of the prophecy of [Zechariah 9:9](#) here is enormously significant. In [Zechariah 9](#), the Messiah comes both as “humble” and as “victorious.” Although he comes riding a peaceful donkey instead of a warhorse, Zechariah says “I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem. The bow of war will be removed, and he will proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion will extend from sea to sea, from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth. This is the king who will destroy the implements of war and establish his reign over all the earth, bringing ultimate peace.

**11:11** The episode concludes with Jesus briefly entering Jerusalem and coming into the temple. Yet it is late in the day and so he leaves the city and returns to Bethany with the Twelve. There he will stay the night. The next day will be a day of confrontation.

### ***Prophetic Action in the Temple and Cursing a Fig Tree (11:12–25)***

**11:12–14** This episode takes place the morning following Jesus’s triumphal entry. Jesus leaves Bethany and sees a fig tree with leaves on it. He is hungry and, thinking the tree might have figs, he approaches it. When he finds no fruit, he curses the tree: “May no one ever eat fruit from you again. Yet Mark points out the reason there was no fruit was: “for it was not the season for figs.” Why would Jesus curse a tree if it was not the season for figs? The answer will come in the next scene.

**11:15–17** When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, he goes into the temple courts, where he sees moneychangers and people selling animals. These people were part of the economy of the temple. The moneychangers were necessary, since the temple tax had to be paid in a particular currency, the Tyrian shekel. The sellers of doves and other animals enabled people to purchase animals for sacrifices in the temple courts. These activities took place in the Court of Gentiles, the outer courts of the temple.

Mark says that Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out those who were buying and selling and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. He said, “Is it not written, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of thieves!” Jesus’s quote here comes from [Isaiah 56:7](#), with an added phrase “den of robbers” from [Jeremiah 7:11](#). Jesus’s point is that these actions are impeding the true purpose of the temple, which is to reveal God’s glory to the nations.

**11:18–19** Disrupting the temple activities, which were a source of massive profit for the religious leaders, was a dangerous and provocative act. Mark notes that the chief priests and the teachers of the law began looking for a way to kill him.

**11:20–25** The next morning, as Jesus and his disciples are leaving Bethany, Peter points out that the fig tree Jesus cursed had withered. Jesus takes the opportunity to teach a lesson on faith. With enough faith, you can say to this mountain, “Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,” and it will happen.

While the cursing of the fig tree is thus used by Jesus as a lesson in faith, it seems likely it has great significance than this. By intercalating or sandwiching the clearing of the temple between the beginning and end of the fig tree account, Mark links the two events. The cursing of the fig tree is not a low blood sugar tantrum by Jesus against a helpless tree. It is rather a prophetic act symbolizing God’s judgment against the religious leaders for their unfaithfulness. This meaning will become clearer as Mark’s narrative progresses through a series of conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders.

### ***A Challenge to Jesus’s Authority (11:27–33)***

Jesus’s clearing of the temple cannot go unchallenged by the religious leaders and is followed by a series of conflicts. While they seek to trap Jesus, revealing their hard hearts, he repeatedly defeats them in debate.

**11:27–28** The first controversy occurs as Jesus and the disciples arrive in Jerusalem the day after Jesus has cleared the temple. The leading priests, the teachers of the law, and elders come to him. These three groups comprised the senior leadership of Israel and the membership of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court. They question Jesus’s actions: “By what authority are you doing these things”

**11:29–33a** Jesus responds to the question with a question. If they answer his, he will answer theirs “Was John’s baptism from heaven or of human origin?” “Heaven” here is a circumlocution for God, Jesus is asking whether they believe John was a true prophet from God. They immediately recognize the trap: “If we say ‘From heaven’ . . . he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’” John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and declared him to be the Messiah. On the other hand, if they answer, “Of human origin,” the people may reject them, since the people believe John was a prophet. Unable to go with either option, they plead ignorance: “We don’t know.”

**11:33b** Jesus responds, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” His point is that if they, who claim to be Israel’s religious guides, are unable to discern whether John was a true prophet, then they have no authority to judge him or to question his authority.

### ***The Parable of the Tenants (12:1–12)***

**12:1–9** Jesus follows the challenge to his authority with a parable that allegorizes God’s dealings with the nation Israel and their coming rejection of himself. This parable begins much like the Song of the Vineyard in [Isaiah 5:1–7](#). In Isaiah, a man plants a vineyard and lovingly cares for it. Yet the vineyard produces only bad fruit. In response, the owner will take down its hedge of protection and allow the vineyard to be trampled. Isaiah then gives the interpretation of the song. The vineyard stands for Israel and Judah, who have been unfaithful. God will judge his people by removing their protection and allowing the Assyrian Empire to overrun them.

Jesus’s parable begins the same way. Yet after introducing the vineyard, the parable takes a different turn. The owner rents out the vineyard to tenant farmers, who repeatedly reject messengers who come to collect the owner’s share of the crop. They beat some and kill others. Finally, the owner sends his own son, thinking they will respect him. Instead, they kill the son and throw him out of the vineyard.

The parable is an allegory about Jesus’s own ministry. The owner is again God and the vineyard is Israel. But the tenant farmers are Israel’s religious leaders, who are supposed to care for the nation. They have repeatedly rejected God’s messengers, the prophets. And now, they are about to reject God’s own son, Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus concludes the parable with a question, “What then will the owner of the vineyard do?” The answer: “He will come and kill the farmers and give the vineyard to others.” The killing of the tenants symbolizes the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans that will occur in AD 70. The “others who receive care of the vineyard likely refer to the apostles and the early church—made up of Jews and Gentiles. Authority will be passed to these new leaders.

**12:10–11** Jesus concludes by quoting from Psalm 118:22, 23: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone . . .” Ironically, this quote is from the same psalm that the people were shouting as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Jesus is portrayed as a stone discarded during the building of the temple. Yet he will become the cornerstone of a new temple, the church, made up of the body of Christ (cf. Acts 4:11; Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:6–7).

**12:12** The episode ends with great irony. In the past, Jesus told parables to conceal the truth from the religious leaders (see 4:11–12). This time, however, they understand that “he had spoken the parable against them.” This understanding, however, does not lead to repentance. Instead, they plot his death, fulfilling their role in the parable. God is going to use their rejection to accomplish his salvation purposes.

### ***A Question About Paying Taxes to Caesar (12:13–17)***

**12:13** This is the third in a series of six controversial stories that follow Jesus’s arrival in Jerusalem and his clearing of the temple. The Jerusalem leaders send some Pharisees and Herodians to “trap him in his words.” We have seen these two groups together before, in the first plot against Jesus in 3:6 (cf. 8:15). They approach Jesus with a bit of flattery, affirming that he is a man of integrity and not a people pleaser. Ironically, they are doing just the opposite, flattering Jesus to try to take advantage of him.

**12:14–15a** They ask him, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” The question is a trap. If he says they should pay taxes to Caesar, he will anger the people, who hate the Romans and their oppressive taxation. If he says they should *not* pay taxes to Caesar, he will please the people but could be labeled an insurrectionist and enemy of the State.

**12:15b–17** Mark adds that Jesus recognized their hypocrisy and responded, “Why are you testing me?” Then he asked for a denarius, a standard Roman coin worth about a day’s wages. When presented with the coin, Jesus asked, “Whose image and inscription is this?” The coin would have had an image and inscription of Tiberius Caesar, the present Roman emperor. When they reply, “Caesar’s,” Jesus responds, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The answer is brilliant in its ambiguity. First, it recognizes the legitimate authority of secular government, which God has established to provide order and justice (cf. Rom 13:1–5). In this sense the answer should satisfy the authorities and avoid a charge of sedition. Yet ultimately, all authority belongs to God and so to give God what is his could mean to give him everything.

The episode ends, as so often in Mark, with amazement expressed toward Jesus. While this amazement is usually at his miraculous power, here it is at his great wisdom.

### ***A Question about Marriage at the Resurrection (12:18–27)***

**12:18–23** This is the fourth in a series of six controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders. This one is between Jesus and the Sadducees, the main political rivals to the Pharisees. One area of theological debate between the two groups concerned the doctrine of the resurrection, which the Pharisees affirmed but the Sadducees denied (see [Acts 23:6–10](#)). The episode begins when the Sadducees, “who say there is no resurrection,” propose a conundrum to Jesus related to the OT law of levirate marriage. This law says that if a man dies childless, his brother is to marry his wife to produce an heir for the dead brother ([Deut 25:5–10](#)). The Sadducees provide a scenario in which a woman marries a man who dies without having children. She then marries his brother, but he also dies childless. This happens to all seven brothers. Finally, the woman dies. Their question to Jesus: ‘In the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be, since the seven had married her?’

This story may have been a common riddle used by the Sadducees to ridicule the Pharisees. It seems to be loosely based on a story in the book of Tobit, a Jewish work written in the second or third centuries BC. In the book, a woman named Sarah marries seven men, all relatives, one by one ([Tob 7:11](#)), but each is killed by a demon before their wedding night ([Tob 3:7–8](#); [6:14–15](#)). Finally, she marries Tobias, son of Tobit, who repels the demon through prayer and the help of the angel Raphael ([Tob 8:1–18](#)).

**12:24–27** Jesus responds to the Sadducees with a strong rebuke, accusing them of ignorance of both the Scriptures and the power of God. They do not understand the power of God because the resurrection is not simply a continuation of normal human existence. It is a new kind of immortal life, where there will be no marriage. Nor do they understand the Scriptures, which teach the continuing existence of God’s people after death. This is seen in the account of the burning bush, where God says to Moses, “I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” ([Exod 3:6](#)). God affirms that his covenant relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob continues to that day, confirming the reality of life after death. Jesus concludes that “You are badly mistaken.”

#### ***A Question about the Greatest Commandment (12:28–34)***

**12:28** While in the first four controversies Jesus is in conflict with the religious leaders, in this fifth Jesus has a more positive encounter and actually finds some common ground. Mark reports that a teacher of the law came and heard Jesus debating. Impressed by Jesus’s answer, he asks him a question: “Which command is the most important of all?” This question was commonly discussed among the rabbis. Hillel (c. 40 BC–AD 10), one of the great rabbis of the first century BC, summarized the whole law as a negative version of the golden rule, “Do not do to your neighbor what is hateful to you: this is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary” (*b. Shabbath* 31a; cf. [Tob 4:15](#)). Rabbi Akiba (c. AD 50–135) similarly summed up the law, “but you shall love your neighbor as yourself . . . This is the encompassing principle of the Law.” (*Sipre Lev.* §200 on [Lev 19:15–20](#))

**12:29–31** Jesus responds, “The most important is,” and quotes Deuteronomy 6:4–5. These are the opening lines of the *Shema*, the greatest confessional statement in Judaism. Jesus then goes beyond the man’s question and gives him the second most important commandment, quoting Leviticus 19:18. Loving God and loving others reflect the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, the first four concerning our relationship with God and the last six our relationship with one another.

**12:32–34a** The man is impressed with Jesus’s answer and commends him: “You are right, teacher . . .” pointing out that loving God and loving others is more important than offering sacrifices. This idea is a common one in Scripture. In 1 Samuel 15:22, Samuel says to Saul, “to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams” (cf. Pss 40:6; 51:16–17; Isa 1:11; Jer 6:20; 7:21–23; Hos 6:6). Seeing the man has answered wisely, Jesus commends him: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

**12:34b** The episode ends with Mark’s comment, “And no one dared to question him any longer . . .” The ability to silence one’s opponents in the debate was viewed as the mark of wisdom and rhetoric skill, although it does seem odd that this statement would come after such a positive encounter. Mark is likely referring not just to this episode, but to the previous four as well.

#### ***A Question about David’s Son (12:35–37)***

**12:35** This short episode is the last in a series of six controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders. Unlike the others, this is not a dialogue or debate, but Jesus raises a theological question. The episode follows naturally from the previous one, where Jesus silenced his opponents. Now Jesus takes the offensive, challenging them with a question of his own: “How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?” The answer seems obvious. The messianic hope has its origin in God’s covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7. God promised David that one day he would raise up his descendant, who would reign forever on David’s throne. The Messiah is the son of David because he is a descendant of David.

**12:36–37a** But Jesus then quotes from Psalms 110:1: “The Lord declared to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’” The first “LORD” here is Yahweh, the Lord God. The second “Lord” is the Messiah. Jesus assumes that David is speaking here and referring to the Messiah as “my Lord.” His question, then, is, “David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How, then, can he be his son?” The assumption is that a son has less authority than a father.

Some commentators claim that Mark is here denying that the Messiah would be from the line of David. But that is not his point. We have already seen that Bartimaeus called out to Jesus as the “son of David” and that the pilgrims entering Jerusalem shout, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David.” It seems clear that for Mark, Jesus is indeed the Messiah from David’s line.

Jesus's question is not meant to deny Jesus's Davidic descent, but rather to show that the Messiah is *more* than just a descendant of David. But Jesus does not actually answer his own question, "How can the Messiah be David's Lord as well as his son?" Some commentators say it is because he will reign over the whole earth, a much greater kingdom than David's. Others say it is because Jesus is also the Son of Man, the glorious messianic figure of [Daniel 7:13–14](#), who will rule over all the earth. However, in the wider context of Mark's Gospel, the most likely answer is that he is not just the son of David, he is *the Son of God* (1:1, 11; 14:61–62; 15:39).

**12:37b** Mark concludes with the statement that "And the large crowd was listening to him with delight." Even when Jesus speaks puzzling things, the crowds are fascinated by his words, and his popularity grows.

### ***Warning About the Teachers of the Law and the Widow's Offering (12:38–44)***

The next two episodes can be treated together, since they represent contrasting patterns of religious devotion. On the one hand, Jesus castigates the teachers of the law, who will face judgment for their pride, hypocrisy, love of adulation, and oppression of the poor. On the other hand, he commends a poor widow, who gives back to God self-sacrificially from her poverty.

**12:38–39** After the question about David's son (12:35–37), Jesus continues on the offensive by criticizing the teachers of the law for their pride and hypocrisy. Jesus points out that they love to walk around in flowing robes—signs of their esteemed office—and to be greeted with respect in the marketplace. They love the most important seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets.

**12:40** Yet while they are privileged and honored, they "devour widow's houses." This puzzling phrase could mean that they exploit the estates of widows for whom they have been appointed guardians. Or perhaps this is metaphorical, and to devour the house of a widow means to take undue advantage of the hospitality and generosity offered by widows.

Jesus concludes that these men will be punished severely. Religious hypocrisy is bad enough, but the OT is full of warnings against exploiting the poor and the vulnerable. Jesus, of course, does not mean that every scribe is like this. In fact, Mark has just described a positive encounter with a teacher of the law. But those in high positions with power and prestige have a greater temptation to abuse that power.

**12:41–42** The next episode continues the account of Jesus in the temple. He is now sitting opposite the place where people would bring their offerings and watching them put their money in the temple treasury.<sup>20</sup> Jesus observes a poor widow, who puts in only two *lepta*, small copper coins worth only 1/64 of a denarius. Since a denarius was worth about a day's wages, 1/64 of this would be "small change," something like 50¢ or a \$1 in U.S. currency.



**12:43–44** Despite the small amount, Jesus is impressed by her generosity. He points out to the disciples that while others gave large amounts out of their wealth, she gave out of her poverty. Her gift was a greater sacrifice and so a greater gift. God does not need our resources. He has all the wealth of the universe. But he gives us the privilege of participating in his kingdom work. The more we invest, the greater the return.

In the next passage, the consequences of Jesus’s judgment against the religious leaders are seen, as he predicts the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem.

### ***The Olivet Discourse (13:1–37)***

Jesus’s “Olivet Discourse”—so named because it took place on the Mount of Olives—concerns two key events, the destruction of Jerusalem and the return of the Son of Man. The challenge is that the two events are closely related in God’s plan and difficult to distinguish in the discourse. In the discussion that follows we will propose the following outline: After an introduction setting up the discourse (13:1–4), Jesus describes the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem (13:5–23). Verse 24 introduces the second coming, which is summarized in verses 26–27. Two illustrations follow. The first, the parable of the fig tree, concerns the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs that will precede it (13:28–31). The second, the parable of a man on journey, concerns the second coming and the need to be vigilant at all times (13:32–37).

#### *Part 1: Introduction (13:1–4)*

The episode begins with Jesus leaving Jerusalem and the disciples commenting on the magnificence of the temple. The Jerusalem temple was one of the great wonders of the ancient world, having been renovated on a grand scale by Herod the Great. Herod had constructed a huge retaining wall and leveled the entire mountain, creating a platform approximately 500 yards/meters north to south and 300 yards/meters east to west. Hundreds of massive columns ran around the interior. The temple building itself stood in the middle of the complex, towering a hundred feet into the sky. When one approached Jerusalem from a distance, the massive white stones gave the appearance of snow-covered mountains. The entire complex was meant to shout out the glory of God. The Jewish people were justifiably proud of this national monument.

When the disciples comment on the temple’s beauty, however, Jesus warns of its destruction: “. . . Not one stone will be left upon another — all will be thrown down.” Jesus then crosses over to the Mount of Olives and sits down overlooking the temple mount. Peter, James, John, and Andrew join him and ask when this will occur and what signs will accompany it (13:3–4).

#### *Part 2: The Present Age and Coming Evil (13:5–23)*

**13:5–8** Jesus first describes the kinds of events that are characteristic of the present age and *do not* indicate an imminent end. He warns that many will come in his name, claiming to be the messiah. There will be wars and rumors of wars, and earthquakes in various places. Although these kinds of cataclysmic events can make it seem like history is ending, Jesus says, “These things must take place but it is not yet the end.” These are just the beginning of the birth pains.

**13:9–13** Jesus also warns of coming persecution—an inevitable part of the Christian faith. His followers will be brought before local councils and flogged in synagogues. They will stand on trial before governors and kings. Yet during this time, the gospel will be preached to all nations. When they are arrested and brought to trial, the Holy Spirit will give them words to say. Persecution will even come from one’s own family. Brother will betray brother even to death. Children will rebel against their parents. Christians will be hated because of their loyalty to Jesus.

**13:14** Here, Jesus apparently reaches the events of AD 70, beginning with the “abomination of desolation.” This phrase originally referred to the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes, the Hellenistic king who in the second century BC sought to eradicate Judaism. His most horrific act was to place pagan shrines in the temple in Jerusalem and to sacrifice unclean animals on the altar (1 Macc 1:54–59). Jesus indicates that something similar is going to happen when the temple is destroyed. Here, Mark adds a parenthetical remark— “let the reader understand”—perhaps suggesting that these events are unfolding in his day. This would make sense if Mark were written in the late 60s of the first century and the destruction of Jerusalem was imminent.

**13:15–23** When his followers see the abomination of desolation, Jesus says, they should flee to the mountains, without even returning home to grab their cloak. It will be especially terrible for those who are most vulnerable—pregnant women and nursing mothers. Remarkably, Jesus says that “For those will be days of tribulation, the kind that hasn’t been from the beginning of creation until now and never will be again.” Jesus adds the puzzling statement that, if the Lord has not “cut those days short” for the sake of “the elect,” no one would have survived. This may refer to the fact that the Christians in Jerusalem were warned in an oracle to get out of the city and so avoided the worst of the suffering there.<sup>21</sup> Or it could refer to the fact that, despite the horrors of the siege, it lasted only about four months, much shorter than some. Finally, Jesus again warns against false messiahs. According to Josephus, many false leaders arose during the last days of Jerusalem, declaring themselves to be God’s prophets or kings.<sup>22</sup> All these proved to be false and in August of AD 70, the Romans breached the last defenses and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

*Part 3: The Second Coming of Christ (13:24–27)*

If Jesus's description up to this point relates to the destruction of Jerusalem, what follows apparently jumps forward to the second coming of Christ and the climax of history. Drawing on apocalyptic imagery from [Isaiah 13:10](#) and 34:4, Jesus refers to cosmic signs that would seem to go well beyond anything that occurred in AD 70: the sun darkened, stars falling from the sky, heavenly bodies shaken. The words that follow would seem to confirm this: "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. He will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." This certainly seems to be the second coming of Christ and the consummation of the kingdom of God.

#### *Part 4: Two Illustrations and Applications (13:28–37)*

**13:28–31** The parable of the fig tree apparently relates to the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus says that when you see leaves come out on the fig tree, you know that summer is near. In the same way, the coming destruction of Jerusalem will be obvious to all. He then makes an amazing prediction: "Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things take place." This was true of the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred a mere 40 years after Jesus spoke these words.

**13:32–36** If the first illustration refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, the second seems to relate to the second coming. This time Jesus starts with the application and then gives the illustration: "Now concerning that day or hour no one knows — neither the angels in heaven nor the Son — but only the Father." This would not seem to apply to the destruction of Jerusalem, since everyone could see coming. It almost certainly relates to the return of the Son of Man. Jesus then illustrates this with the parable of the absent homeowner. When a man goes away on a journey and leaves his servants in charge, they must be vigilant and responsible, since they do not know when he is returning.

**13:37** Jesus concludes the discourse with the theme that has been repeated throughout: "Be alert." The challenging days ahead will demand faith and perseverance.

#### ***The Plot to Arrest Jesus and the Anointing at Bethany (14:1–11)***

Chapter 14 introduces Mark's passion narrative: the last supper, Jesus's arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection.

**14:1–2** Mark signals the beginning of the passion narrative by noting that the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away (14:1). This is the first reference in Mark's Gospel to a specific event on the calendar, or even to the time of year.

The Jewish Passover celebrated God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt, when God's angel of death "passed over" the Israelite households marked with the blood of the Passover lamb (Exod 12:1–13, 23, 27). Jesus's death at Passover was significant since he is the final and perfect Passover Lamb (John 1:29, 36; 1 Cor 5:7; 1 Pet 1:19; Rev 5:6, 12). The Festival of Unleavened Bread began with Passover and continued for seven days, Nissan 15–21 on the Jewish calendar. Its name comes from the command to the Israelites to remove leaven from their households in preparation for the exodus.

The two episodes that follow represent another of Mark's intercalations. The account of a woman anointing Jesus with expensive perfume (14:3–9) is "sandwiched" between the religious leaders' plot to destroy Jesus (14:1–2) and the betrayal by Judas (14:10–11). In this case, the two episodes stand in contrast. The devotion of the woman is the antithesis of the hatred and duplicity of the religious leaders and Judas.

While "looking for a cunning way to arrest Jesus and kill him," the leaders decide to wait until after the festival because of Jesus's popularity with the people.

**14:3–5** The scene now changes to Bethany, where Jesus is at a dinner party in the home of a man named Simon. Simon is described as "the leper," which likely means one healed by Jesus. This anointing (par. Matt 26:6–13) is probably the same historical event as that of John 12:1–8, where the woman is identified as Mary of Bethany. The anointing in Luke 7:36–50, however, is almost certainly a different historical event, since it occurred in Galilee much earlier in Jesus's ministry and involved a notorious sinner.

In Mark's version, an unnamed woman comes into the dinner party with an alabaster jar of extremely expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus's head, a symbol of hospitality. Some of those present (identified in John as Judas) object to the financial waste since the perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii (almost a year's wages) and the proceeds given to the poor.

**14:6–7** Jesus, however, rebukes these critics and tells them to leave the woman alone because she has done "a noble thing" for him. He adds, "You always have the poor with you, and you can do what is good for them whenever you want, but you do not always have me."

Jesus's words, at first sight, may seem callous, but this is to misread them. Elsewhere Jesus strongly stresses the need to care for the poor.<sup>23</sup> Jesus's point here is that there is something greater at work in his ministry than good deeds for the poor. Jesus is here to establish the kingdom of God, which will ultimately end all poverty, sin, disease, and death. By honoring him, the woman is celebrating what he has come to do.

**14:8–9** Jesus continues that her anointing is preparation for his burial. In Judaism, perfume was used to cover the stench of decomposition and to honor the dead. This is not to suggest that the woman knew Jesus was going to die. Rather, her act of devotion symbolically pointed forward to his coming death. Jesus concludes that wherever the gospel is preached this woman's actions would be remembered. Ironically, her quiet humility will result in great praise. As Jesus says elsewhere, "The last will be first" (9:35; 10:31).

**14:10–11** After the anointing, the narrative returns to the plot against Jesus. Although the religious leaders planned to arrest Jesus *after* the Passover, they are delighted when Judas Iscariot comes and offers to betray him. They promise him money and he begins looking for an opportunity.

### ***The Last Supper and Prediction of Peter's Denial (14:12–31)***

**14:12–16** In a second chronological note (cf. 14:1), Mark reports that it was the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread when the Passover lambs were sacrificed. The Passover had to be eaten in the city of Jerusalem, so the disciples ask where they should make preparations. As in the procurement of the colt earlier (cf. 11:1–3), Jesus gives very specific instructions, this time to follow a man carrying a water jar (easily identified since women normally carried water). As in 11:4–6, the disciples find this just as Jesus had predicted, and they prepare the Passover.

**14:17–21** The Passover meal itself is described in two parts. First, as the meal is being served, Jesus predicts that one of his own disciples will betray him. While they all vehemently deny it, Jesus concludes, "For the Son of Man will go just as it is written about him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!" Here we see a convergence of human responsibility and divine sovereignty. Judas is responsible for his own actions and will face judgment. Yet this has all been predicted ahead of time and will accomplish God's purposes.

**14:22–25** The second part is Jesus's institution of the Lord's Supper. By identifying the bread as "my body" and the wine as "my blood of the covenant," Jesus essentially creates a *new Passover*, which will establish the new covenant (Jer 31). Just as the first covenant at Mount Sinai was established through the blood of sacrificed animals (see Exod 24:8), so the new covenant will be established through Christ's own blood, bringing true forgiveness of sins and authentic knowledge of God. The phrase "poured out *for many*" recalls Mark 10:45, which in turn echoes Isaiah 53:11–12, where the suffering Servant of the LORD sacrifices himself for the sins of "the many."

**14:26–31** After singing a hymn—presumably one of the Hallel psalms used in the Passover liturgy—Jesus and the disciples leave for the Mount of Olives. On the way, Jesus predicts that all the disciples will fall away, citing Zechariah 13:7: "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered." Jesus then predicts not only his death but also his vindication: "But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." When Peter pridefully claims he will never fall away, Jesus predicts Peter's own denial.

### ***The Agony of Gethsemane (14:32–42)***

**14:32** The passion narrative continues as Jesus and his disciples leave Jerusalem to the east and cross the Kidron Valley up the western slope of the Mount of Olives. They arrive at a place called Gethsemane, a Hebrew word meaning “olive press.” John’s Gospel identifies it as a “garden,” which probably means an olive grove with a press for crushing olives into oil. Luke says Jesus went there regularly ([Luke 22:39](#)).

**14:33–34** Jesus leaves the other disciples and takes his “inner circle” of Peter, James, and John with him further into the garden. Mark emphasizes Jesus’s true humanity by noting his deep distress. Overwhelmed with sorrow, Jesus tells his disciples to “Remain here and stay awake.” They are to be his guard so that he can have uninterrupted prayer.

**14:35–36** Jesus then goes further and falls to the ground. This could indicate either submission in prayer or emotional collapse. Jesus addresses God as “*Abba*,” Aramaic for “father.” The use of the Aramaic here (the language of Palestine) is strong evidence that Jesus used this intimate term to address God. Although Jews of that day sometimes referred to God as “the father” (of creation, humanity, etc.) Jesus’s consistent use of the vocative in prayer and his invitation to his disciples to do so ([Matt 6:9](#)), represents an unprecedented level of intimacy. On the other hand, some have claimed the word means “Daddy,” but this is not quite right, since adult children would address their fathers using this term. Mark’s understanding of the term is clear since he provides a Greek translation: *ho patēr*, meaning “father.”

A view of the city of Jerusalem from across the Kidron  
Photo Credit: Phil Thompson, CC BY-SA 4.0

Jesus prays, “All things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me.” As noted before, the cup a common biblical image for suffering and judgment (see 10:38–39). Here we get a glimpse of Jesus’s true humanity as he agonizes over his coming fate. Yet in the end, he willingly submits to the Father, “Nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will.”

**14:37–42** In contrast to Jesus’s faithful obedience is the disciples’ unfaithfulness. Jesus returns three times to find them sleeping, each time rebuking them. This is another “triad” (group of three) in which the disciples represent a negative model (see [Introduction](#)). Jesus is the true model for discipleship, staying faithful to the end. On his third return, Jesus announces his betrayal: “The time has come. See, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.” The agent of the passive “is betrayed” would naturally refer to Judas. But it could also be a divine passive since ultimately God is orchestrating these events. Compare [Romans 8:32](#): “He did not even spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. How will he not also with him grant us everything?” (see also [Rom 4:25](#)). Throughout the passion narrative, we will see God using human evil to accomplish his good purposes.

### ***The Betrayal and Arrest (14:43–52)***

**14:43** As Jesus is announcing that his betrayer has arrived, Judas appears. Mark describes him as “one of the Twelve,” emphasizing the poignant fact that Jesus is betrayed by one of his own (cf. 14:18, 20). With Judas is a crowd carrying swords and clubs. There is a debate as to the makeup of this group. Since they were sent by the religious leaders (14:42) they likely included temple police. The massive temple complex had its own police force, a militia that guarded the premises and kept order (cf. [Luke 22:47, 52](#)). But John’s Gospel also speaks of a “cohort” with a “tribune” leading them ([John 18:3, 12](#)), terms commonly used for the Roman military. So, there were likely both Jewish and Roman troops.

**14:44–46** Mark notes that Judas has arranged to identify Jesus with a kiss. This was likely for identification purposes in the dark since only Judas could get close enough to Jesus without arousing suspicion. The act, of course, is highly ironic, since a kiss was a sign of love and hospitality. At this signal, the soldiers seize Jesus and take him into custody.

**14:47–50** All four Gospels report that a bystander drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant. Only John identifies the man as Peter and the servant as Malchus, and Luke alone reports that Jesus healed the ear. In Matthew, Luke, and John, Jesus responds by telling the disciple to put away his sword and calling for a cessation of violence. Here in Mark, Jesus only rebukes them for coming out against him “as if he was a criminal” when every day he has taught openly in the temple. Yet even this duplicity was part of God’s plan: “But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.” The episode ends dramatically with the disciples fleeing, abandoning Jesus. From this point forward he will be isolated and alone.

**14:51–52** Only Mark adds the strange account of the young man who is seized but slips out of his linen sheet/garment and escapes. Who was this man? Mark does not say and the other Gospel writers omit this episode. Some commentators view this individual as symbolic rather than historical. Others try to identify him as one of the Gospel characters. The most likely explanation is that this is Mark himself. We know Mark was a young man at the time and that his mother Mary owned a house in Jerusalem ([Acts 12:12](#)). Perhaps that was the house where they celebrated Passover, and Mark, a young man at the time, followed the disciples to the garden. While speculative, this scenario makes the most sense of the available evidence.

### ***Jesus Before the Sanhedrin (14:53–65)***

**14:53** Jesus’s trial in Mark has two phases, a Jewish phase before the Sanhedrin, and a Roman one before the governor Pontius Pilate. Jesus is first taken to the high priest’s home, where “all the chief priests, the elders and the scribes” are gathered. The Sanhedrin was the highest judicial body in Israel. It was traditionally made up of seventy members and led by the high priest.

**14:54** Mark adds that Peter followed from a distance, entering the courtyard of the high priest and warming himself by the fire. John’s Gospel notes that this access was possible because Peter was with another disciple (John?) known to the high priest ([John 18:15](#)).

**14:55** This episode may be another of Mark’s sandwich structures. After Peter enters the courtyard (14:53–54), the account is interrupted by the questioning of Jesus by the high priest (14:55–65) and resumes with the account of Peter’s denial (14:66–72). The two episodes stand in contrast to one another. While Jesus courageously confesses his identity, Peter cowardly denies his own.

**14:56–59** Although the Sanhedrin brings in false witnesses against Jesus, their stories do not agree. Some accuse him of threatening to destroy the temple. Jesus certainly predicted the temple’s destruction (13:3), but he did not threaten it himself. In [John 2:19–21](#), Jesus said “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days.” But John points out that Jesus was referring to the temple of his body.

**14:60–61** The high priest challenges Jesus to respond to these accusations, but Jesus remains silent. Finally, in frustration the high priest asks: “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Messiahship and divine Sonship are closely linked in the OT. David was promised that one of his descendants would reign on his throne forever, and that he would have a father/son relationship with God ([2 Sam 7:14](#); cf. [Ps 2:7](#); [89:26–27](#)).

**14:62** In response, Jesus gives his most straightforward self-identification in the Gospel. He says, “I am . . . and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.” Jesus is here alluding to two OT passages. “Sitting at the right hand of Power” alludes to [Psalm 110:1](#), which is used throughout the NT to describe Jesus’s exaltation and vindication at God’s right hand. “The Son of Man . . . coming with the clouds of heaven” alludes to [Daniel 7:13–14](#), where one like a son of man—that is, a human being—comes before the Ancient of Days—God himself—and is given an eternal kingdom and is worshiped by all the nations of the world. Jesus essentially says, “Yes, I am the Messiah, and although I am standing before you on trial now, one day you will stand before me.”

**14:63** This is too much for the high priest, who tears his clothing as a sign of outrage and says, “Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy.” The whole Sanhedrin now condemns Jesus as worthy of death. They spit on him, blindfold him and mock him, turning him over to the guards, who continue the mocking.



### ***Peter's Denial (14:66–72)***

**14:66–70** Mark now returns to the account of Peter, which he left after verse 54. A female servant notices Peter and stares, accusing him of being with “Jesus, the man of Nazareth.” Peter denies it and moves to the entryway, perhaps anticipating a quick escape. This makes her even more suspicious and she follows, announcing to others, “This man is one of them!” Peter again denies it. The commotion provokes the interest of others, who point out that Peter, like Jesus, is a Galilean. Mark does not say how they knew, but Matthew refers to Peter’s Galilean accent ([Matt 26:73](#)).

**14:71** Now Peter responds by swearing a curse. This does not mean, as some translations have it, that he uttered profanities, but that he swore a curse. Some commentators suggested Peter cursed Jesus, to show he was *not* a disciple. Others think Peter is pronouncing a curse on himself, something like, “Let me be cursed if I know this man!” Finally, Peter flat out lies, saying “I don’t know this man you’re talking about!”

**14:72** At this point the rooster crows. Some manuscripts say that the rooster crowed “the second time,” and record a first crowing back in 14:68, after Peter’s first denial. This confusion goes back to Jesus’s original prediction in 14:30, where some manuscripts say that Peter will deny Jesus three times before the rooster crows “twice.” The inclusion of “twice” seems to be the harder reading and so the better one. A copyist would be more likely to harmonize Mark to the other Gospels, which record only one crowing. In any case, Peter now remembers Jesus’s words and recognizes what he has done, breaking down in tears.

### ***The Trial Before Pilate (15:1–15)***

**15:1** Early the next morning, the Sanhedrin take Jesus to the governor Pilate. This was necessary because the Jews were not allowed to practice capital punishment without Roman approval ([John 18:31](#)).

Pontius Pilate was the Roman prefect of Judea from AD 26–36. While Galilee was ruled by the Jewish king, Herod Antipas, Judea was an imperial province, administered by a Roman governor who answered directly to the Emperor. This had been the case since Antipas’s brother Archelaus had been removed as king of Judea in AD 6. Pilate normally resided in Caesarea Maritima, the Roman headquarters on the Mediterranean coast. Yet he would come to Jerusalem during the major festivals to keep order.

**15:2–5** When the religious leaders bring Jesus to Pilate, Pilate asks, “Are you the King of the Jews?” It seems likely that, since the Romans would be reluctant to crucify Jesus for heresy, the Sanhedrin has accused him of sedition, claiming to be a king. The Sanhedrin must convince Pilate that Jesus is a *political* threat.

Jesus gives an evasive answer, “You say so.” This probably means something like, “That is how you would say it, but my kingship is not what you think.” When the chief priests continue to accuse him he remains silent. Pilate is surprised that Jesus will not defend himself, so asks, “Aren’t you going to answer?” But Jesus does not reply, fulfilling the prophecy of [Isaiah 53:7](#), where the Servant was “oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.”

**15:6–15** Mark now mentions an annual custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover. When the crowd approaches Pilate and asks for the release, he assumes they will choose Jesus, knowing that he is innocent. But the religious leaders have stirred up the crowd to ask for the release of Barabbas, an insurrectionist and murderer. When Pilate asks what he should do with the king of the Jews, they reply, “Crucify him!” Pilate’s objections that Jesus is innocent go nowhere and they continue to cry, “Crucify him!” Finally, wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate releases Barabbas and hands Jesus over to be crucified.

Some have claimed that Pilate would never have acted in such a weak-willed fashion. But in fact, these actions fit his personality well. Pilate generally treated the Jews with disdain. But he also feared their influence with Caesar and so wanted to keep them happy. He also cared little for justice and only wanted to protect his own position. Although he likely believed Jesus was innocent, the danger of executing a peasant-prophet from Nazareth was far less than alienating the religious leaders and the crowds of Jerusalem. So, he orders Jesus to be flogged and crucified.

### ***The Mocking and Crucifixion of Jesus (15:16–32)***

**15:16** After Pilate orders the execution of Jesus, the soldiers lead him into the palace, which Mark identifies as the “Praetorium.” This has traditionally been identified as the Fortress Antonia, the Roman barracks overlooking the northwestern corner of the temple compound. But it seems more likely that Pilate was staying at the luxurious palace of Herod in western Jerusalem than the spartan Roman barracks at Antonia and that Jesus’s trial took place there.

**15:17–20** Since Jesus has been sentenced for royal claims, the soldiers mock him as a king. They put a purple robe on him and place a crown of thorns on his head, hailing him as “King of the Jews.” They also fall on their knees to do fake homage, beat him with a staff—perhaps mimicking a royal scepter—and spit on him (cf. [Isa 50:6–7](#)). Finally, they lead him off to be crucified.

**15:21–22** Mark reports that the soldiers enlisted a man named Simon from Cyrene in North Africa, to carry Jesus’s cross. He also notes that Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus, who must have been known to his readers. If this is the same Rufus who is identified as part of the church in Rome [Romans 16:13](#), this would give further credence to the idea that Mark was written in Rome. While John speaks of Jesus carrying his own cross, the Synoptics say Simon carried it. A simple harmonization is that in his weakened condition, Jesus collapsed under the burden of the cross, and so Simon was enlisted to pick it up.

Crucifixion was a horrific method of execution. Victims were tied or nailed to a wooden stake or cross and allowed to slowly die in agony. Places of crucifixion were usually on major highways. The Romans used crucifixion not just as a punishment, but as a public warning against revolution. Mark says that this place was called Golgotha, which means “place of the skull.” This name may relate to the many deaths that occurred here, though some think it refers to a rocky outcropping that resembled a skull.

**15:23–24** Some people present try to offer Jesus wine mixed with myrrh. This was probably a narcotic, meant to dull the pain. Jesus, however, refuses it. Neither Mark nor the other Gospel write dwell on the horrors of crucifixion. Mark says simply “they led him out to crucify him.” It was not uncommon for executioners to claim the right to the victim’s clothing, Mark reports that the soldier divided Jesus’s clothes by casting lots. John’s Gospel identifies this as a fulfillment of Psalm 22:18 (John 19:24).

**15:25–26** In one of his rare chronological references, Mark mentions that it was the third hour, or nine in the morning when they crucified him. Victims of crucifixion were often required to carry a placard around their neck declaring their crime, which was then nailed to the cross above them. Jesus’s placard reads, “The king of the Jews.” This is enormously significant in that it confirms that Jesus was crucified for royal or messianic claims.

**15:27** Mark relates that two “criminals,” were crucified with Jesus, one on the right and one on the left. The word for robber or bandit (*lēstēs*) was commonly used by the Romans as a derogatory way to refer to revolutionaries (“common criminals”). These were probably the comrades of Barabbas, the revolutionary who was freed in Jesus’s place.

**15:29–32** What follows is the mocking of Jesus by many who were present. Three groups are identified. First, the people walking by mock him, repeating the claim that he threatened to destroy the temple and chiding him to save himself. The religious leaders pick up this chant, mocking Jesus for his messianic claims and saying “he saved others, but he cannot save himself!” There is a heavy irony here. By staying on the cross Jesus is saving others, rather than himself. Finally, those crucified with him “taunted him.” Only Luke records the account of the salvation of one of these two (Luke 23:40–43).

### ***The Death and Burial of Jesus (15:33–47)***

**15:33–34** The crucifixion account in Mark continues with another chronological reference. Mark notes that at the sixth hour (noon) darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour (3:00 pm). Jesus has been on the cross for three hours now. The darkness likely symbolizes God’s judgment. At that time Jesus cries out with a loud voice: “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani.*” This is the Aramaic version of the words of [Psalm 22:1](#), “My God my God, why have you abandoned me?” Many believe that this is the moment when God poured out his judgment on Jesus for the sins of the world and that in his isolation Jesus felt forsaken by God. Others have claimed, however, that by quoting the beginning of the Psalm, Jesus has the whole psalm in view, including the vindication by God at the end. While this interpretation is possible, it seems unlikely. Jesus could have quoted from this part of the psalm had he intended to express vindication. Instead, he chose words of isolation and agony. As in the garden of Gethsemane, we see here a glimpse of Jesus’s true humanity.

**15:35–36** Hearing this cry, some of those present say, “See, he’s calling for Elijah.” This may be because *Eloi* sounds a bit like “Elijah.” It may also have something to do with the fact that Elijah was expected to come before God’s final day of judgment, and Jesus has been preaching that “the kingdom of God” is at hand. Someone runs to get some wine vinegar to offer to Jesus, perhaps to allow Jesus to talk more clearly, then says, “Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down.”

**15:37** Finally, with another loud cry, Jesus dies. Some have suggested this last cry were the last words recorded in John, “It is finished” ([John 19:30](#)), or those in Luke, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit” ([Luke 23:46](#)). But since Mark does not say, we should probably not speculate.

**15:38–39** Two additional events mark the climax of the crucifixion. First, the curtain of the temple torn in two from top to bottom. This tearing could symbolize God’s judgment. Or it could indicate that the way to God has been opened up through Christ’s death. The second event is the shout of the centurion overseeing the execution. Seeing how Jesus died, he says “Truly this man was the Son of God!” As we noted at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, this statement forms an *inclusio* or bookend with Jesus’s baptism. There, the heavens were torn open, and God the Father announced, “You are my beloved Son.” Now the curtain temple is “torn” (same Greek word), and a Gentile centurion announces that Jesus is the Son of God. These are two great revelations of Jesus’s identity. The first one confirms that Jesus is indeed the mighty Messiah and Son of God, a key theme throughout the first half of Mark’s Gospel. This second confirms that *in his suffering* Jesus fulfills this role, the key theme of Mark’s second half. Shockingly, the first person to recognize that *in his death* Jesus fulfills the role of Messiah is a Gentile, hinting where the gospel is ultimately going to go.

**15:40–41** Mark concludes the crucifixion narrative by noting that some women who supported Jesus in Galilee were watching from a distance, including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joseph, and Salome. The women will play an important role in the burial scene and the discovery of the empty tomb.

**15:42–43** Mark notes that it was preparation day, the day before Sabbath. Wanting to take Jesus’s body down before the Sabbath began, Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for permission. Joseph is described as a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God. Prior to this, the Sanhedrin has been portrayed as unanimously opposing Jesus. Now we see there was at least one who was not. This story also confirms the historicity of the account. It is unlikely the church would invent a story in which a member of the judicial body that condemned Jesus also gave him a noble burial.

**15:44–46** Pilate is surprised that Jesus has already died since victims of crucifixion usually languished for days. Pilate summons the centurion, who confirms that Jesus has already died, so Pilate releases the body to Joseph. Joseph purchases linen cloth to wrap the body, lays it in a tomb, and rolls a stone across the entrance. Jewish burial practices of that day entailed setting the body in the tomb until it decomposed, then placing the bones in a storage box called an ossuary.

**15:47** Mark also notes that two women—Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph (probably the same Mary as in 15:40)—were present at the burial. This prepares the reader for the discovery of the empty tomb on the third day.

## Epilogue: The Resurrection Announced

Mark’s account of the discovery of the empty tomb is both brief and puzzling. Yet it is also a profound call for faith.

**16:1** Perhaps because of the hasty burial on Friday evening, some of the women wish to give greater honor to the body of Jesus. “When the Sabbath was over” refers to Saturday evening, when shops would reopen after sundown. The spices that the women purchase are not for embalming, but to cover the stench of the body as it decomposes.

**16:2–4** The women set off for the tomb “very early in the morning, on the first day of the week”—that is, Sunday morning. On the way, they begin to wonder how they will roll the “very large” stone away from the entrance. Yet they are shocked to see the stone has already been rolled away. Why had they not considered this before? In Mark’s narrative, the statement prepares for the shocking discovery of the empty tomb.



The Garden Tomb | Photo Credit: Phil Thompson, CC BY

**16:5–6** The “young man” they encounter in the tomb is obviously an angel, as confirmed by his white robe and the announcement he makes (cf. [Matt 28:3](#); [John 20:12](#); [Acts 1:10](#); [Rev 4:4](#); [19:14](#)). Their “alarm” is a typical reaction in Scripture to an angelic encounter, as also is his assuring response (cf. [Judg 6:22–23](#); [Dan 10:10–12](#); [Matt 1:20](#); [Luke 1:12–13](#)).

The angel serves as the authoritative interpreter for the scene before them. The tomb is empty but what does this mean? Some have claimed that the body was removed, or stolen, or that the women were at the wrong place. The angel gives the true answer: “He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.”

**16:7** The angel announces not only the resurrection but the (future) resurrection appearances. They are to go to Galilee, “You will see him there.” “Just as he told you” points to the three passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34), but especially to Jesus’s announcement at the last supper (14:28).

**16:8** The response of the women is fear, bewilderment, and silence. What is shocking is that the Gospel ends at this point in our earliest manuscripts. There is a longer ending, verses 9–20, which describe various resurrection appearances. The problem is this longer ending was almost certainly not written by Mark. The vocabulary is different from Mark’s. The grammar and style are different. The theology is different. Mary Magdalene is introduced as though readers do not know who she is, even though she has been in the previous three episodes. And the stories that follow are summaries of resurrection appearances in the other three Gospels. This passage was no doubt added by a later scribe to smooth over what seemed to be a very abrupt ending.

What happened to the ending of Mark’s Gospel? Did he *not* finish it? That seems unlikely, that Mark would get to the last page and stop. Was it lost? This is possible, but it seems unlikely that a page would be lost before the first copy was made. The most likely answer is that Mark intentionally end his gospel abruptly. The women have the resurrection announcement, but they have not yet seen Jesus alive. Will they respond with faith or with fear?

That is the same question confronting Mark’s original readers, who were suffering and even dying for their faith. It is the same question that believers throughout the ages must answer. How will we respond to the announcement of the resurrection? Will we respond with faith—boldly proclaiming the message—or with fear and silence?

One point we ought to add: some people say there is no resurrection in Mark’s Gospel. That is not true. The tomb is empty, and the angel announces, “Jesus is risen.” Since angels are absolutely reliable characters in Mark’s Gospel, we can trust that—from Mark’s perspective—Jesus has risen. Furthermore, at least four times Jesus has predicted that he was going to rise from the dead. Since Jesus is also a fully reliable character in Mark’s Gospel, what he says has certainly come true.

Furthermore, although there are no resurrection appearances *narrated* in Mark's Gospel, there *are* resurrection appearances. The angel says, "He is going ahead of you to Galilee." Jesus also predicted they would see him alive in Galilee after his resurrection (14:28). Since, again, these are absolutely reliable characters who speak only truth, from Mark's perspective Jesus rose from the dead *and* was seen alive by his disciples.

The only question that remains is how we will respond: with faith or with fear? Mark's Gospel is a reminder that the coming of Jesus changed everything. Through his life, death, and resurrection, he has defeated Satan, sin, and death for all time. The kingdom of God has been inaugurated and will be consummated when the Son of Man returns in glory. The invitation to enter that kingdom stands open to those who respond in faith. That is a message worth celebrating, and a message worth proclaiming!

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## Endnotes & Permissions

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4. M. Hengel, “The Titles of the Gospels,” in *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 64–84.
5. Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39.15.
6. Chrysostom, *Homilies in Matthew* 1:7.
7. Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies in the Redaction History of the Gospel*; tr. James Boyce (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).
8. J. Marcus, *Mark I–VII*, 35–36.
9. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.
10. Friedrich, *TDNT* 2:722, 724–25.
11. Although Mark says that Jesus fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy, he quotes first from [Exodus 23:20](#) and [Malachi 3:1](#). Ricki Watts and others have made the helpful suggestion that Mark is placing the whole of Mark’s Gospel under the banner of Isaiah’s eschatological salvation (Ricki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000]).
12. James F. Strange and Hershel Shanks, “Has the House Where Jesus Stayed in Capernaum Been Found?,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 8, 6 (Nov./Dec. 1982), 26–37.
13. [Luke 18:12](#); *Didache* 8:1; *b. Taanith* 12a; cf. *m. Taanith* 2.9.
14. There is a difficult historical question here. Although Mark’s text refers to the high priest as Abiathar, it was Abiathar’s father Ahimelech who gave David the bread. The simplest solution is that the Greek phrase *epi Abiathar archiereōs* does not mean, “when Abiathar was high priest,” but rather “during the time period of Abiathar, the high priest,” or even “in the account about Abiathar the high priest,” since Abiathar plays a key role in the narrative that follows and would become high priest.
15. For details see Strauss, *Mark*, 168.

16. See France, *Mark*, 273, n. 71.

17. For references, see Strauss, *Mark*, 321–22.

18. Cranfield, *Mark*, 287–88, 500.

19. See Paul Minear, “The Needle’s Eye. A Study in Form Criticism,” *JBL* 61 (1942), 157–69.

20. The Jewish Mishnah—the code of Jewish law—speaks of thirteen “Shofar-chests,” trumpet shaped receptacles in the temple where people would put their gifts and offerings (*m. Shekalim* 6:1 5).

21. Eusebius, *Church History* 3.5.3.

22. Josephus, *War* 2.13.4-5 §§258–263; 2.17.8–9 §§433–48; 4.9.3–8 §§503–44; 6.5.2–3 §285–300.

23. Matthew 5:3; 19:21; Luke 1:46–55; 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 11:41; 12:33; 14:13, 21; 18:22; 19:8; Jol 12:8.

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