

Mark-by Tommy Lee

### Chapter 1

In today's reading the King is proclaimed, baptized, tested, going out into the world to announce the inauguration of his kingdom, calling disciples to himself, driving out evil spirits, and healing the sick. The curse of sin has corrupted everything, and the King has finally come—as was promised many centuries earlier—to set things right. *"Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king.... No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; he comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found."* The gospel of Mark certainly starts off with a bang! And yet, in verses 35-39, the king quietly slips away to a lonely place to pray, *"very early in the morning."* Not for the last time in this book, Simon (later and better known as Peter) seemed to think that Jesus was missing an opportunity to do something that was really much more important. As Jesus will tell Simon later, *"You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."* (8.33) But what does Jesus' time in prayer reveal about his mission? Is he a mere miracle-worker? Or a Savior?

### Chapter 2

Today we see Jesus make **two** "indirect" (but unmistakable) claims to be the eternal God in human flesh. First, in the opening story, he claims the right to tell someone that all of their sins are fully and absolutely and totally forgiven. The scribes, quite correctly, object that only God can do this. Second, in the closing story, he simply claims that he is the Lord, even of the Sabbath—which was instituted by God Himself, as a loving gift to his people, for rest and for worship. The question of who exactly Jesus is, since he seems to be more than a mere man, will become more and more urgent in Mark's gospel. And yet, in the middle story (verses 13-17), with whom is this Jesus—who claims to be God in the flesh—spending his time? Who is flocking to his message of forgiveness and new life? And who welcomed those who came? And who did not? Note: to the self-righteous and self-satisfied, Jesus has nothing to offer whatsoever. The only way to enter his kingdom is by confessing that you are sick with sin and need a Savior to make you well (v.17). *"I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

### Chapter 3

Around the middle of this chapter, Jesus appoints the 12 (whom he named apostles) so that they might *"be with him"* for a while—learning to center all of their lives around *him and his life*—before he sent them out to proclaim the good news of his kingdom. Considering all that the Bible teaches us about these 12, one thing we note is how very ordinary and imperfect they were. How like us they were. There are no "Super Christians" in the Bible; only sinners saved by Jesus' grace. Often the Bible even goes out of its way to make this point clear. As Paul says later in the Bible, we are indeed carrying around the treasure of Christ in *"jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us"* (2 Corinthians 4.7). But what wonderful thing does Jesus say about his ordinary and imperfect followers in verses 31-35? Look at it again, and you'll see that it's a wonderful thing indeed! But let us also note, in that last verse, the Bible's customary contrast between merely "hearing" the will of God and actually "doing" the will of God. See Jesus' half-brother James teach the same in James 1.22-25

### Chapter 4

Back in chapter 2 (verses 17, 19, & 21) Jesus gave us some "mini-parables," but here at the beginning of chapter 4 we have the first expanded parable, told with detail and explained in full. But really, rather than *us interpreting the parable*, this is actually *the parable that interprets us*. Even now—as we read and consider the 4th chapter of Mark together—the Word is being sown. How are we responding? Our response will generally fit into one of Jesus' four categories... and note that only one category is good. Therefore Jesus warns us to listen thoughtfully and well (verse 9). In some ways this parable will

be the key to all the other parables. Do we trust Jesus enough to take his Word seriously? We see at the end of the chapter that the windstorm and the waves take his Word quite seriously. Jesus may have "rebuked" the storm, but the real rebuke for us to consider is the one he gave to the disciples: "*Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?*" After thinking about that, ponder the question that is pressing upon the reader in the last verse—the question with which every disciple must deal.

## Chapter 5

Do you like sandwiches? There's something called a "sandwich story" that is actually a common feature in Mark's gospel. This is when Mark will begin one story, but then he interrupts it with a (seemingly) completely different story, only then to come back and conclude the first story—which is now "sandwiched" around the inside story. It's a story within a story, a story inside of another story. Whenever this happens, the two stories are actually helping to interpret one another—paralleling or contrasting one another in some way. Verses 21-43 provide a classic example. There are two "daughters" (see vs.23,34) of "twelve years" (see vs.25,42). One is sick and then becomes dead. The other is unclean according to the Jewish laws of bodily discharges (Leviticus 15), which is *ceremonial death* in that culture—cut off from temple worship and suffering many social inconveniences. But then Jesus heals and resurrects both the unclean and the dead... those who have faith, who believe (vs.34,36). These become the People of God (the repeated "twelve" symbolizes Israel, the people of God at that time).

## Chapter 6

Remember the "sandwich story" from Mark 5? There's another sandwich story here. The story of John's death at the hands of King Herod (vs.14-29) is "sandwiched" by Jesus sending out the twelve to preach repentance, cast out demons, and heal the sick... and their return, to tell Jesus all that they had done and taught. How do these two interwoven stories help interpret one another? (Remember, that's what sandwich stories do!) For starters, contrast King Herod & King Jesus; both claim to be "King of the Jews." One is filled with compassion for the demon possessed & sick (v.13), for the weary disciples (v.31), for the great crowd—who are like sheep without a shepherd (v.34), for the hungry (v.41), etc. The other is filled with lust, fear, guilt, pride, murder, and sin. One gives a banquet of miraculous food, on green grass (v.39). The other is also hosting a banquet... but what's on his platter (v.28)? Also, we note that this is a story of persecution and death wrapped up inside a story of mission. That in itself might even be a picture of the whole of Mark's gospel! Hmm... let's keep reading...

## Chapter 7

In the first part of today's reading the Pharisees—who are endlessly criticizing, determined not to believe—make a complaint against Jesus' disciples. This hand-washing deal was not about hygiene, as it sounds to us today; it was a matter of a Jewish religious tradition (a religious tradition of man's devising, not found in Scripture) whereby you wash away any "germs" of sin that you may have caught by contact with "unclean" Gentiles in the marketplace. After a stinging rebuke—quoting the prophet Isaiah—about their reliance on these man-made traditions rather than Scripture, Jesus further exposes the "many" ways these religious leaders cast aside God's Word in the name of their precious religious traditions. (*Now, think about this for a moment... Do we still do this? Note that any tradition that contradicts Scripture is a tradition that must be exploded.*) Then, in vs.14-23, Jesus comments on the real nature of sin. It's not at all like a germ that you catch from unclean people ("Gentiles"). It's an awful cancer in your heart, requiring radical surgery. How do vs.24-30 continue this same theme?

## Chapter 8

It's been said that every single paragraph in Mark can be assigned to one of these three questions: Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? Why did he come? What would it look like for me to follow him? Back in October of 2013 we devoted two articles from the DPC Thursday Email to unpacking this more fully, so let me know if you'd like to see that again. But here, at the very heart of Mark, all three of those questions intersect with one another. It's Mark's mid-term exam! But he is freely giving us the answers. *Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?* Consider how that question is bluntly introduced and answered in 8.27-30. *Why did he come?* See how that question is bluntly answered in 8.31-33. *What would it look like for me to follow him?* See how that question is bluntly dealt with in 8.34-38. At the center of Mark's gospel all three questions converge in this one conversation. But really all 16 chapters are treating all three questions. The gospel itself literally explains the gospel! But note: a big theme of this chapter is human blindness to these truths. But there is hope here; Jesus can heal the blind.

### Chapter 9

The "transfiguration" moment in this chapter becomes more and more fascinating the more you unpack all the Biblically-rich images and participants involved (a mountain, the color white, the prophet Elijah, the "law-giver" Moses, the cloud, etc.); sadly, there's not enough space here to fully explore all of that. But ponder it yourself and realize that the centering point of it all is the Father's voice from Heaven: *"This is my beloved Son; listen to him."* Everything that is there represented by all those images and participants points to Jesus, the beloved Son of the Father. All of it. With that in mind, let vs. 42-48 remind you afresh of how serious a matter the kingdom of Jesus Christ is. That kingdom is so valuable that putting spiritual stumbling blocks in the way of it will be punished quite severely. It is so valuable that no personal sacrifice is too great to make for it, even those things you hold as your most precious possessions (as precious as a hand, a foot, an eye). It would be infinitely and eternally better for you to lose those things than to lose Christ. The big point: Jesus is God's beloved Son. Listen to him.

### Chapter 10

*"What do you want me to do for you?"* Jesus asks this question **twice** in this chapter, in v.36 and in v.51. In v.36, it's two of the disciples; they want to sit with Jesus in his glory. (And note, by the way, that v.41 indicates that the other 10 disciples wanted the same thing; they were indignant when they heard that James & John were trying to get dibs—*the most powerful force in the universe*—on the seats at Jesus' right and left hands.) In v.51, Jesus puts this question to a blind man named Bartimaeus. He just wants Jesus to give him mercy (vs.47,48). Clearly, Bartimaeus has the right idea. And here's why: he knows that he is blind, and he knows that Jesus can heal him. The disciples are being presented as "blind" as well—throughout the whole chapter (vs.10, 13, 24, 26, 32-34). But the difference is, *they don't know that they are blind*. How often are we just like that? We see and hear a lot, but we don't fully get it. But again, there is hope for us... because Jesus can heal the blind. With that in mind, especially meditate upon vs.42-45; here Jesus is opening our blind eyes to the ways of his kingdom.

### Chapter 11

Remember Mark's fondness for "sandwich stories"? We described the sandwich story this way, back on Friday, August 21: *"This is when he begins one story, but then interrupts it with a (seemingly) completely different story, only then to conclude the first story—which is now "sandwiched" around the inside story. It's a story within a story. Whenever this happens, the two stories are actually helping to interpret one another—paralleling or contrasting one another in some way."* Consider the sandwich story here in chapter 11: **Fig Tree, Part I** (vs.12-14)—**Temple** (vs.15-19)—**Fig Tree, Part II** (vs.20-26). How are the fig tree and the temple alike? What does Jesus say about the condition of the fig tree? What does he say about the condition of the temple? Remember, Jesus wasn't grumpily striking dead a healthy tree, just because he could. He was assessing its true condition, and pronouncing solemn

judgment upon its barren fruitlessness. He's also here assessing Israel's true condition, and it's a very solemn warning—still today—upon dead, empty, barren, fruitless religion. "Have faith" (v.22).

## Chapter 12

"Which commandment is the most important of all?," is the question put to Jesus in v.28. And note that—unlike the two previous questions put to Jesus in this chapter—this question is real and genuine (not merely a trap). The scribe who asked this question had observed that Jesus had answered all the other questions well (v.28). He then commented on Jesus' answer in a way that drew praise: Jesus esteemed the man's response as "wise," and went on to tell the man that he was not far from the kingdom of God (v.34). So, what answer did Jesus give to this man's question about the most important commandment of all? Love. Love for **God**—"with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength"—and love for your **neighbor**—"as yourself." Note well: all of the law of God, in its entirety, is actually just an exposition of these two commands. Any law you point to is either an unpacking of what it means to love **God** or what it means to love **neighbor**. Have you re-centered your loves? How do vs.38-44 end this chapter with two contrasting pictures of love?

## Chapter 13

This reflection isn't long enough to thoroughly enter into all the details of this study, but let me encourage your own reflections on it with these three considerations: **One**, the Bible often uses symbolic language in chapters like Mark 13 (or like much of the book of Revelation). The symbols aren't meant to confuse us; they are meant to reveal things to us. We just have to know the Bible well enough to work out the symbolism. It's one small part of what makes the journey into the Bible great fun!... **Two**, what Jesus reveals here is not intended to make us infallible prophets of the "end times." (Not even Jesus claimed that, see v.32.) What Jesus reveals here is designed to make you a more faithful disciple, a more mature believer, a more resolute follower of the Christ. "Stay awake" (v.37)... **Three**, consider that Jesus only made two major prophecies. One was about his own death and resurrection. The other was about the Jewish temple (see v.2 & v.30). Both prophecies were fulfilled; history has recorded them, and their ripple effects are still felt even today. The words of Jesus remain forever (v.31).

## Chapter 14

Note that the institution of the Lord's Supper is set between two accounts of human sin. In vs.18-21, Jesus prophesies that one of the twelve will betray him. In vs.26-31, Jesus prophesies that all of the twelve will "fall away" from him that night. The sin of Judas on the one side; the sin of Peter on the other side. (Although, actually all of the remaining disciples followed Peter in his sin—see v.27 & 31 & 50—but Peter is the one most highlighted, vs.31 & 66-72.) But what made the ultimate difference between Peter's final situation and Judas' final situation? Both sinned grievously. Yet one is forgiven and restored (see Mark 16.7 & John 21.15-19), and the other is not forgiven and restored. What made the difference? In thinking through that question, consider 2 Corinthians 7.10: "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." As always, the thing that separates is simply the presence of repentance and faith—a living faith in the one who here stands in between Judas's sin and Peter's sin, pointing to his sacrifice (vs.22-25).

## Chapter 15

Jesus was called the "Son of God" in the very first verse of Mark's gospel: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." As things unfolded, we saw demons refer to him as the Son of God (3.11; 5.7; see also 1.34). We heard God the Father call Jesus his beloved Son, once at the beginning of the story and once in the middle (1.11; 9.7). Jesus also referred to himself in this way (12.6; 13.32;

14.61,62). But... we have waited in vain for one of the disciples or followers of Jesus to confess him specifically as the "Son of God," in Mark's gospel. The believing reader has known this from the very first sentence, and we wait for the full realization to joyfully break forth from the lips of the disciples. Surely they will give Jesus his title after this miracle? After that one? After this teaching? After that one? Surely it's obvious by now? And yet, we still wait. And finally... in the second-to-last chapter of the book, a normal human being does indeed identify Jesus as the Son of God. It's in 15.39. But it's deeply ironic. Would *you* have recognized the Son of God, sacrificed and crucified and dead?

## **Chapter 16**

Mark apparently ended his gospel rather abruptly, in v.8. Abrupt endings do happen from time to time in the Bible, and they always carry a point. Consider the abrupt ending of Jesus' famous parable in Luke 15.11-32. It's very open-ended, leaving the reader to answer the unresolved questions for himself or herself. But at some point in the early church some scribes seem to have "rounded out" Mark's ending, largely using material taken from the other gospels, or from Acts, or—in one instance—from early church tradition. The footnotes in your Bible will tell you what the manuscripts show. But, consider v.8 as the ending of this gospel. What do you think? Is it a good ending or a bad one? If it's a good ending—one that startles us into thought—what might the point of this abrupt ending be? As you consider, note the following: the resurrection is proclaimed; it's presented as something that even Jesus' closest disciples were not expecting; embarrassed and fallen Peter is singled out for particular comfort; Jesus' promise in 14.28 is reiterated; witnesses are sent out bearing the good news.

## **Reflecting on Mark-**

Before moving on to our next book of the Bible, take some time today to reflect on what we've read in Mark. Perhaps re-visit a favorite chapter or an especially meaningful passage. Or read the beginning chapter(s) again, now that you've read the whole. Or go back to a part of the book that struck you as curious and see if it makes more sense now. Or speed-read the whole thing again, seeking to reinforce its main themes. Or... perhaps you need a catch-up day to finish Mark before we move forward?

*"Blessed is the man... [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers."* Psalm 1