



BIBLE STUDY RESOURCES

Mark



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MARK 1:1-15

AIM

- To repent and believe the gospel because God's promised King has arrived.

CONTEXT

Mark is clear that his book is about the gospel (1:1), - good news. There is some suggestion that 'gospel' might be a technical term current at the time of Mark's writing. It referred to the accounts written to announce the good news of military victory in the Roman Empire. Mark might be deliberately using this word to say that one greater than the emperor has arrived in Jesus Christ.

The two descriptions of Jesus used in v.1, shape the material that is to follow. The idea of Jesus as **Christ** is the focus of chapters 1-8 and climaxes at 8:29 with Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. The idea of Jesus as the **Son of God** is the focus of chapters 9-16 and climaxes at 15:39 with the centurion's confession that this was the Son of God.

STRUCTURE

- 1-3 The Old Testament Announces the King
- 4-8 The Prophet Announces the King
- 9-11 God the Father Announces the King
- 12-13 The King is Opposed
- 14-15 The King Announces the Kingdom

1. THE OLD TESTAMENT ANNOUNCES GOD'S KING (1:1-3)

Mark's gospel does not begin with the birth of Jesus. Rather it begins with two quotations from the OT [Malachi 3:1-15 and Isaiah 40:1-5]. The point is to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfilment of the OT hope of a Messiah. He does not appear on the stage of history from nowhere. His coming has been foretold and anticipated by the prophets:

- Malachi spoke of a messenger (identified in Mal 4:5 as Elijah) who would prepare for the coming of God. This coming would be one of judgement.
- The Isaiah passage opens a section of prophecy which looks forward to the coming of the servant who will save God's people.

2. THE PROPHET ANNOUNCES GOD'S KING (1:4-8)

Verse 4 makes explicit the fact that the OT prophecies are now about to be fulfilled - the messenger who goes ahead of God's messiah is now here preparing the way of the Lord.

John's ministry of baptism demonstrates that history is turning and that this turn demands a return to God. Baptism was a common practice in Judaism but usually for Gentiles who wished to identify with God's people. Therefore, Jews undergoing baptism were expressing their desire to live a new life of repentance in response to God's forgiveness.

John is clear in his preaching in v.7-8 and his stance that he is only a forerunner. He brings the symbol (water baptism) but the one coming after him will bring reality (Spirit baptism). The contrast is reinforced by John's statement that he is not worthy even to do the most menial task for the one to come.

3. GOD THE FATHER ANNOUNCES HIS KING (1:9-11)

Verse 9 is surprising in the light of all that has gone before. John has just expressed his inferiority to the one to come and yet now we find Jesus submitting to the baptism of John. What is going on?

The scene must be read against the background of the OT. God's Kings were anointed by the prophet and received the Holy Spirit as a consequence [cf. 1 Sam 10:1-13 (Saul), 16:13 (David)]. A common name for the king was 'Son of God' [cf. Psalm 2].

Therefore, with this in mind we can see a similar structure at work in the baptism of Jesus - the prophet (John) anoints the king in baptism. The king receives the sign of the Holy Spirit (v.10b) and the divine name, Son (v.11).

God's acknowledgement of Jesus indicates that all he will do and say has divine approval.

4. GOD'S KING IS OPPOSED (1:12-13)

Again, v.12 marks a sudden shift. Several of the commentators make much of the location and say Jesus is recapitulating the experience of Israel in the wilderness. This idea is present in some of the other Gospels (e.g. Luke 4 where it is made explicit) but it does not appear to be part of Mark's agenda. Similarly the idea that Mark is setting Jesus up as second Adam (due to the presence of the wild animals!) is fanciful.

Mark's intention seems to be no more or no less than to establish that conflict with Satan will be a major part of the ministry of Jesus. This theme will recur throughout Mark starting later in this chapter (v.24).

5. GOD'S KING ANNOUNCES THE KINGDOM (1:14-15)

The interpretation of v.12-13 as being centrally about conflict is confirmed in v.14 as Mark tells us that John was arrested. If this is how the 'one crying in the wilderness' is treated then what can the Son of God expect?

Verse 15 contains the first words of Jesus in Mark and therefore must be significant for the whole project:

- 'The time is fulfilled' - takes us back to the turning of history: all that the OT looked forward to is now about to come to pass.
- 'The kingdom of God is at hand' - the kingdom of God is not a geographical concept. Rather it is a dynamic concept referring to the reign of God wherever and whenever it is found. It is 'now at hand' since the King has arrived in Jesus.
- 'Repent and believe' - this is the only possible response to this new reality. Life cannot go on as normal. Life has to change. From now on it has to be lived in obedience to the King (so repent) and it has to be lived in commitment to the King (so believe).

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How does this passage change the way I think about the identity and task of Jesus?
- In what areas does it challenge me to repent and believe today?

MARK 1:16-39

AIM

- To recognise that Jesus rules over all reality.
- To listen to his words.

CONTEXT

Mark has introduced us to God's King - Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1) - in the first part of chapter 1. Jesus not only is the gospel (1:1) but he also announces the gospel - "the kingdom is at hand" (1:15). Mark now goes on to establish the range of the rule of Jesus in a number of incidents. He concludes this section by establishing the priority of Jesus.

This section also forms the beginning of a larger section of Mark which concludes in 3:6 with the Pharisees looking for a way to destroy Jesus. Opposition to Jesus will mount throughout the section. Mark signalled this theme to us in 1:12-14a.

STRUCTURE

16-34 The King demonstrates His Authority

35-39 The King declares His Priority

1. THE KING DEMONSTRATES HIS AUTHORITY (1:16-34)

Mark records four incidents which establish the comprehensive range of Christ's kingly authority.

i. Authority over men 1:16-20

Jesus issues a command to Simon and Andrew in v.17 and we are told in v.18 that they immediately followed him. The same pattern is repeated in v.19-20 with James and John. Rabbi's normally waited for people to follow them but here Jesus issues sovereign commands. The point is that he has total authority over men. He has the right as God's King to demand total obedience from human beings.

Mark is also giving us a concrete example of what it looks like to repent and believe the gospel following on from 1:15. To follow Jesus will involve leaving everything - work (v.19) and family (v.20). He will return to it in 3:35, 8:34-38, 10:21, 29-31.

ii. Authority to teach 1:21-22

Mark has exemplified the power of Jesus' words in v.17-18. He now reinforces this theme in the setting of the synagogue. The point is clear - Jesus teaches 'as one who had authority'. This is no ordinary teacher - he is not like the scribes. In fact his teaching is so extraordinary that the people 'were astonished' (v.22).

iii. Authority over demons 1:23-28

Jesus is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit. The spirit has an orthodox view of the identity of Jesus - 'the Holy One of God' who has come to destroy them (v.24). Again Mark draws attention to the authority of the word of Jesus in v.25 as he rebukes, silences and exorcises the evil spirits and makes an immediate impact.

Jesus silences the evil spirits for a number of reasons. First, as a demonstration of his authority over them. They have controlled the man, Jesus now controls them. Second, Jesus wants to reveal his identity on his terms and in his time not in their way and in their time. Hence, even though their identification of him is accurate, he silences them.

Again Mark is interested in the reaction of the crowd. They are amazed in v.27 and ask the question, "What is this?" as they consider how he commands the obedience of the evil spirits. This is the question Mark constantly wants to put before us - "What is this?" and "Who can do these things?"

iv. Authority Over Sickness 1:29-31

Finally Jesus is brought to see Simon's sick mother-in-law. By now the outcome is predictable - she is made well.

Interestingly, Mark does not record that Jesus said anything (v.31). His actions heal her.

Conclusion

Mark wants us to see that Jesus has authority in all areas of life in God's world. He is Lord of mankind (v.16-20) with astonishing authority to teach (v.21-22). He has come to reverse the effects of the Fall as he silences evil spirits (v.23- 28) and heals sickness (v.29-31).

Mark draws all this material together in v.32-33 as he describes in general terms the response Jesus has generated. He signals that he has given us a deliberate selection of incidents in v.16-31 when he tells us in v.34 that Jesus 'healed many' who were either sick or demon possessed. V.16-31 were not flukes!

2. THE KING DECLARES HIS PRIORITY (1:35-39)

V. 32-34 form an introduction to v.35-39. Jesus is gaining a significant reputation as a healer /exorcist in the whole city of Capernaum (v.33).

Therefore, it is all the more striking that he rises early in the morning and withdraws to pray in a desolate place (v.35). Why doesn't he get up and go back to work healing and exorcising? The need is immense.

Mark makes much of Jesus' periodical withdrawals to pray. He only records three of them (here and in 6:46 and 14:32-42). Each time Jesus is facing a time of crisis and decision. The words of the disciples in v.37 reinforce the nature of the decision facing Jesus - will he give into the demands of the crowd and be a popular miracle worker or will his priorities lie elsewhere?

Jesus is unequivocal in his priority. He chooses to leave Capernaum (and all its sick) in order to preach in the next towns (v.38). He is quite clear that it is to preach that he has come.

Interestingly, v. 39 goes on to tell us that Jesus preaches throughout Galilee but also that he was involved in 'casting out demons'. The establishment of his priority to preach does not mean that Jesus now neglects a holistic ministry. Healing and exorcism will reappear frequently in Mark's gospel (e.g. 3:1-6, 5:1-43, 6:53-56) often with a teaching purpose. But, they are not 'mere' illustrations. They say something substantive about the kind of kingdom Jesus has introduced. However, the priority of preaching means that to understand their significance we must listen to the words of Jesus as he interprets them for us. This is the big point to take from this section - from here on in Mark's gospel, listen to the words of Jesus.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How do we limit the authority of Jesus?
- In what ways do we avoid listening to the words of Jesus?

MARK 1:40-2:17

AIM

- To be amazed that Jesus has authority to forgive and cleanse sinners.
- To see that Jesus' priority is to forgive sinners.

CONTEXT

Mark has announced the arrival of God's king, Jesus Christ, in 1:1-15. He has gone on to demonstrate the scope of Christ's kingly authority in 1:16-33 and his priority to preach in 1:34-39.

Now, in 1:40-2:17, Mark narrows the focus to demonstrate the priority of Christ's exercise of his kingly authority - the forgiveness of sin.

The next passage also begins a section where the conflict with Satan (introduced at 1:13) begins to take concrete form in the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees. Mark uses a series of increasingly hostile questions (2:7, 2:16, 2:18, 2:24) to make this point and the section climaxes with the intention of the Pharisees to accuse and destroy Jesus (3:2, 6). Mark wants us to know that the King will be rejected, his authority will be refused by the very people who should have recognised it.

STRUCTURE

1:40-45 Jesus has authority to cleanse

2:1-12 Jesus has authority to forgive

2:13-17 Jesus makes sinners his priority

1. JESUS HAS AUTHORITY TO CLEANSE (1:40-45)

There are a number of incidental points to make before we see the major point of this section.

- V.41 nuances our understanding of v.38. Christ's priority to preach is not a cold, calculating, time management technique. The ESV's 'moved with pity' might be better translated 'moved with indignation'. It indicated Christ's profound anger at the effects of sin in a fallen world as evidenced by this man's disease. He heals him not only as a 'teaching aid' but also as an act of compassion. It can also be seen as a revolt against the rule of Satan.
- Leprosy was an alienating disease within Israel. It isolated the sufferer socially and spiritually, as he would not have been allowed to live among people or to go to the temple or synagogue (Leviticus 13:46).

Once more Jesus demonstrates his authority. The man realises that Jesus has power to heal (hence his request at v.40) but also that the decision is for Jesus to make. Jesus chooses to heal the man in v. 41 and by touching him shows his power. In Jewish thinking anyone who touched a leper would become ceremonially unclean (see laws for cleansing a house with leprosy in it Lev. 14:36). But, Jesus far from becoming unclean makes the man clean (v.42).

Jesus fulfils the OT law as he tells the man to go and show himself to the priest (see Lev 14). The nature of the proof (v.44) is not immediately clear. It might be proof that the man is ceremonially clean; it might be proof that Jesus has healed him. Either way the section shows that Jesus has authority to cleanse.

The incident anticipates what is to come inasmuch that there seems to be a close symbolic connection between leprosy and sin in the OT. This does not mean that lepers were guilty of particular sins that others were not. However, leprosy seems to point to a deeper reality of sin. Hence, among the offerings to be made in Leviticus 14 are offerings of atonement. Therefore, Jesus in healing the leper is demonstrating his authority to provide true cleansing beyond the merely physical.

2. JESUS HAS AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE (2:1-12)

This incident is very familiar to many of us. Indeed this over familiarity can immunise us against the deeply shocking nature of the narrative. Jesus is now doing what we would expect of him - he is preaching (v.2a). It is a wonderfully dramatic story - four men tearing away at the roof and dropping their friend at the feet of Jesus (v.2-4).

The shock comes in v.5. Jesus, fully aware of the man's intense physical need, chooses to tell him that his sins are forgiven. He does so in response to the faith of the man and his friends, faith in him as one who can heal. The forgiveness of sins appears to be higher on the agenda of Jesus even than the alleviation of physical suffering.

The scribes see the importance of what he has just done - v.7

"He is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus gives two indications that he is God in what follows:

i. He discerns the unspoken questions of the scribes (v.8)

ii. He calls himself the Son of Man (v.10)

- The Son of Man is an OT figure spoken of in Daniel 7:13-15
- He is presented to God v.13
- He is a human figure
- He is a divine figure receiving the service/worship of the nations in an eternal kingdom v.14-15

Jesus makes clear that he will heal the paralytic as a sign that he has the authority to forgive his sins (v.10). It is easy to say 'your sins are forgiven' but hard to do. Whereas superficially it is harder to say 'Rise, take up your bed and walk' since everyone will see whether or not you have been successful.

Therefore, when Jesus successfully heals the paralytic, the crowd were "amazed and glorified God" presumably since Jesus has shown his authority to heal and forgive. Notice the crowd is not gullible - they say, "we never saw anything like this".

3. JESUS MAKES SINNERS HIS PRIORITY (2:13-17)

The calling of Levi is very similar to the calling stories in 1:16-20. Once again it demonstrates Jesus' authority over men. However, here it serves a bigger function. Mark wants us to know that it occurs in the context of Jesus teaching the crowd (v.13). It must illustrate a point Jesus wants to make. We are given a hint when we are told that Levi was 'sitting at the tax booth'.

Tax collectors were social and spiritually outcasts. They collected taxes on behalf of the Roman occupying force and were often known to exploit their fellow countrymen. As a result they were seen as enemies of God and his people.

Remarkably Jesus not only calls this man to follow him but he also reclines at table in his house with many others like him. To eat with a person in Christ's culture was a deep sign of acceptance. This provokes the Pharisees in v. 16 to ask the question, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?".

The response Jesus gives them in v.17 is the second purpose statement in Mark (cf. 1:38) and hence has particular significance. Don't get too worried about why Jesus might refer to the Pharisees as having "no need of a physician" or "righteous" (it's probably irony - the narrative as it unfolds to 3:6 demonstrates how far from God they are). The main point Jesus is making is that he has come for sinners. He calls Levi and eats with him and his friends in order to illustrate that reality.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- Jesus makes it his priority to forgive sin. Have we been forgiven by him?
- How do we stay amazed at the power of Jesus to forgive sin?

MARK 2:18-3:35

AIM

- To see that the growing opposition to Jesus is evidence of the rejection of old Israel and the calling of a new Israel by Jesus.

CONTEXT

Mark has established the authority of Jesus as God's king in the early chapters of his gospel. In 1:40- 2:17 he has shown the authority and priority of Jesus to cleanse and to forgive sinners as he preaches.

We have also seen the growth of opposition to Jesus from both satanic (1:13, 1:24) and human (2:7, 2:16) forces. This opposition now begins to grow in this section climaxing in the resolution of 3:6 and being made concrete in the events of the rest of the passage.

In the face of this opposition Jesus will continue to exercise his authority as he defines and calls a new people of God. This people will transcend all the usual national, ethnic and biological boundaries.

STRUCTURE

- 2:18-3:6 God's King has authority over a new age (even though he's opposed)
3:7-35 God's King has authority over a new people (even though he's opposed)

1. GOD'S KING HAS AUTHORITY OVER A NEW AGE (EVEN THOUGH HE'S OPPOSED) (2:18-3:6)

The three incidents in this section revolve around the religious practices of fasting (2:18-22) and sabbath-keeping (2:23-3:6). All three incidents revolve around provocative questions, first from the opponents of Jesus (2:18, 2:24) and then from Jesus himself (3:4). The atmosphere grows increasingly poisonous until we reach the resolution of 3:6 which will inform much of what occurs in the gospel from now on.

A. "Why don't your disciples fast?" 2:18-22

Fasting was required by Jewish Law only on the Day of Atonement (as a sign of sorrow for sin – Lev. 16:29 'afflict' [ESV] can also be translated as 'fast' [see footnote in NIV]). It was practised more regularly by some Jews, John's disciples and the Pharisees being among them (2:18). God is not impressed by fasting for the sake of fasting in the OT (Is 58) and looks forward to a time of joy when the messiah comes (Is 65:17-18, Jer 31:31-34, Ezek 36:26).

Therefore, the answer Jesus gives to the question of 2:18 is that mournful fasting is inappropriate since the time for messianic joy has arrived in him. The true cleansing which the day of atonement anticipated has arrived in him (cf. 1:40-2:12). When he leaves then there will be time to fast. A new age has arrived which changes all the old practices (2:21-22)

Jesus calls himself 'the bridegroom' which is probably an allusion to the OT description of God as Israel's husband / bridegroom (e.g. Hos 2:16-20, Is 54:5, 62:4-5). He is the divine messiah inaugurating a new age.

B. "Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 2:23-28

The Sabbath in the OT was designed to teach Israel that her rest was ultimately in God alone. He would provide a lasting eternal rest for them (Heb 3:7-4:11). The Pharisees go after the disciples of Jesus since they think that their actions constitute reaping and thus violate the Sabbath (Ex 34:21).

Jesus' response is remarkable. He reminds them of an incident deep in the OT (1 Samuel 21:1-9) which appears to have nothing to do with the Sabbath. It does however constitute a violation of the letter of the law. Jesus might be saying this is how God's king in the OT acted with authority so God's king in the new age is similarly free - he is lord of the Sabbath (v.28). Or Jesus might be reminding the Pharisees that the law is meant to be a blessing not a burden to humankind - it was made for man (v.27). The Pharisees have turned it into a burden but he, as the authoritative son of man and lord of the Sabbath in the new messianic age restores it to its rightful place.

C. "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm?" 3:1-6

The healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath drives home the point that Jesus is lord of the Sabbath. Jesus confronts the Pharisees with his authority through the use of the question in v.4, (note the passion of Jesus in v.5) and his healing in v.6. The healing makes concrete his claim to be lord of the Sabbath. He is the one who brings God's ultimate rest.

V. 6 is a climax of the section - the Pharisees will never recognise his authority. But, it is also a preparation for all that is to come. From here on in Jesus is on a long death march to Jerusalem.

2. GOD'S KING HAS AUTHORITY OVER A NEW PEOPLE (EVEN THOUGH HE'S OPPOSED) (3:7-35)

This section weaves incidents of the authoritative calling of Jesus of a new Israel with the continued rejection of old Israel. They reject Jesus and he rejects them.

A. Old Israel rejected, new Israel established 3:7-19

Mark seems to deliberately place the incident with the crowd in v. 7-12 alongside the calling of the apostles in v. 13-19. He is inviting us to compare and contrast them.

Mark gives us geographical markers in v.8 which describe the boundaries of Israel. The crowds prove to be a threat to the ministry of Jesus (v.9) as we have seen already in the gospel (cf. 1:37-38). The demons seem to indicate a similar threat (v.12 cf. 1:25). Mark seems to be saying that the crowd, old, ethnic Israel, do not understand Jesus. There is need for a new Israel.

Hence in v. 13-19 Jesus establishes the basis for a new Israel. He does so on the mountain (v. 13 echoing the Sinai experience in Exodus where he constitutes Israel as his people) and in the number 12 (v. 14 parallel to the 12 tribes of Israel). He does so with authority (v.13) and gives to the 12 the same priority to preach with his delegated authority (v.14-15). Interestingly, Mark tells us that even within this number there will be opposition (v.19). New Israel will look very much like old Israel at certain points.

B. Old Israel rejecting, new Israel defined 3:20-35

This section is bookended with references to the biological family of Jesus (v.20-21 and v.31-35. They accuse Jesus of being out of his mind because they have to miss dinner! They do not understand him and reject his ministry. Hence in v.31-35 Jesus makes it clear that his true family are those who do the will of his Father. (Members of the biological family of Jesus do ultimately enter this true family). This is the true Israel.

Between these bookends we have the section where Jesus interacts with the scribes. Again this is deliberate on Mark's part - he wants these verses to serve as a commentary on the family's rejection of Jesus and hence on anyone's rejection of Jesus for whatever reason.

The accusation of the scribes is that Jesus performs exorcisms in the power of Satan (v.22). Jesus tells them that is ridiculous - how can Satan drive out Satan and remain strong ("the house divided" sayings in v. 23b-26)? On the contrary the work of Jesus is to bind Satan (the "strong man") so that he can plunder his house. The accusation of the scribes constitutes the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

"What is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?"

The text tells us - v.30: it is to attribute the work of Jesus to Satan. To make such an attribution is to resolve to reject the person and work of Jesus. The fact that the sin is against the Holy Spirit might point back to 1:10-11 where the anointing of Jesus by the Spirit is a sign of his kingship. Therefore, to blaspheme against the Spirit is to reject the kingship of Jesus. Those who are worried about having committed it will not have committed it - they need to hear the words of assurance Jesus gives in v.v.28. Those who do commit it will not be worried about it. They will not care about rejecting Jesus.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- What has this passage taught us about Jesus and how we should respond to him?

MARK 4:1-34

AIM

- To listen to the word of God, to accept it and to bear fruit since this is the way God's kingdom grows.

CONTEXT

Mark has announced Jesus as God's king (1:1-15) and established the authority of Jesus over all creation (1:16-34). He has demonstrated the priority of Jesus to preach and to forgive (1:38-2:17).

In 2:18-3:35 Jesus demonstrates this authority by teaching that his coming has inaugurated a new age. He is the bridegroom and the lord of the Sabbath (2:18-3:6). He calls to himself a new people, from out of God's old people (3:7-19) and declares that one belongs to this new people not through biological descent but by doing the will of his Father (3:35). The 12 apostles are to share in the priority of Jesus to preach and to cast out demons (3:14-15)

Meanwhile, opposition has been developing against Jesus. It is both Satanic (1:12-13, 24) and human (3:6) - it comes from his family (3:20-21) and the leaders of the people (3:22-30).

In Mark 4:1-34 Jesus shows us what it looks like to do the will of the God (cf. 3:35). He explains to his disciples why there is a mixed and often hostile reception to his and their ministry. He assures them that the kingdom will grow.

STRUCTURE

1-9,14-20	The description of kingdom growth
10-13, 21-25	The secret of kingdom growth
26-34	The assurance of kingdom growth

1. THE DESCRIPTION OF KINGDOM GROWTH (4:1-9,14-20)

Jesus tells a parable in public to the crowd (v.1) and explains it in private to his disciples (v.10, v.14). The meaning of the parable centres on the communication of the word (v.14). Jesus indicates that there are in fact only two ultimate responses to his word: either one of ultimate fruitlessness (v.15-19) or one of ultimate fruitfulness (v.20).

In the context of all we have seen in Mark so far Jesus is describing the varied responses we have seen to his teaching. There has been receptiveness to the word of his call (1:16-20, 2:13-14, 3:13-19) but also fundamental rejection (3:6). The description of kingdom growth tells the disciples that this is to be expected. Jesus sees it in his ministry and no doubt they will see it in their ministry.

2. THE SECRET OF KINGDOM GROWTH (4:10-13, 21-25)

These verses are not easy (!) but the two sections are clearly unified by the reference to the 'secret' (v.11, v.22). The disciples ask Jesus to explain his method - why does he teach in parables? (v.10). Jesus says that he has given the secret of the kingdom of God to his disciples (v.11) - the 'secret' in the context appears to be the ability to *understand* the kingdom. This becomes clear as he contrasts them with 'outsiders' who hear the parables and *fail* to understand them (v.12).

His enigmatic comment in v.14 fits this interpretation. To understand this parable about the mixed response to the word (expressed by Jesus in parables) is to understand all the parables. If you understand this then you will be among those who gladly hear the word.

V. 21-23 press this point home. The secret of the kingdom is to be made manifest in the life of the disciples as they understand the words of Jesus.

What then does it look like to be given the secret of the kingdom? It is to listen to Christ's word, accept it and to bear fruit (v.20). Jesus constantly encourages his hearers to 'listen' and 'to hear' (v.3, v.9, v.20, v.23, v.33). This encouragement reaches a climax in v.24 where Jesus tells his disciples to 'pay attention'. V. 25 teaches that the more they 'pay attention' or 'listen' or 'hear' the more they will understand.

But, the parables have another function according to v.12. It is possible to 'hear' them but not to 'understand'. Those outside of the kingdom (v.11) will not understand. "...the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." Again, this explains the centrality of this parable (v.13). If you do not understand the parable about the importance of hearing and accepting the word of the kingdom and bearing fruit then you will be on the outside of the kingdom.

It is important to look at the context of the quote in v.12 from Isaiah 6: 10. Isaiah goes on in v.13 to speak of the preservation of a remnant. So, even as Jesus teaches the word and experiences widespread lack of understanding and rejection, God will be calling out a remnant to belong to him through the same teaching.

Finally, Jesus exemplifies his point in his method. The secret of the kingdom is understanding the word of the kingdom which leads to acceptance and fruitfulness. So, Jesus teaches the word of the kingdom and sees both understanding from his disciples and misunderstanding from the crowd.

3. THE ASSURANCE OF KINGDOM GROWTH (4:26-34)

The section ends with two parables which describe the kingdom and its growth.

i. Kingdom growth is inevitable (v.26-29)

The parable functions as an encouragement. Jesus and his ministry of preaching will be opposed. The same will be true for the disciples as they follow his pattern (cf. 3:14). Nonetheless, the kingdom is unstoppable. The word of the kingdom (cf. v. 26 'seed' and v.14) inevitably will bear fruit (cf. v.29 and v.20).

ii. Kingdom growth is universal (v.30-32)

Again, the parable provides reassurance. The scope of the kingdom will be massive despite apparently tiny beginnings. The image draws on an OT metaphor for greatness. God promises to make the remnant of Israel great (Ezekiel 17:22-24) like a tree with many branches. Equally he promises to chop down the great trees of the disobedient nations (Ezekiel 31, Daniel 4).

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How are we tempted not to listen to the words of Jesus?
- How does this section encourage us when we face opposition and indifference to the gospel?

MARK 4:35-5:43

AIM

- Not to fear but to place our faith in Jesus who has authority over nature, Satan and death.

CONTEXT

Jesus has been announced as God's king and has demonstrated his authority. A central part of his strategy is to teach and preach (1:38, 2:2, 13, 4:1). Jesus has called 12 men to continue this ministry (3:14). The content of his preaching is that the kingdom of God is at hand and the response called for is one of repentance and belief (1:15).

He has emphasised in 4:1-34 that the word about him is the way that the kingdom will grow. He grants understanding to kingdom insiders (4:11) but kingdom outsiders will never hear and understand (4:12). The response demanded throughout the section was to 'listen', 'hear', 'accept' and to 'bear fruit' (4:20). Faith moves forward and is now picked up in 4:35-5:43.

The theme of opposition and rejection has continued from its crystallisation in 3:6. The key parable of the sower (4:13) indicates that there will always be a mixed response to the word about Jesus including satanic attack (4:15). The teaching about this reality, along with the two parables about the nature of the kingdom (4:26-32), prepares the reader and the apostles for the mixed response that Jesus will receive in the rest of his ministry. It is not unexpected. It does not prevent the kingdom growing.

The next section focuses in on the necessity of faith in Jesus (4:40, 5:34, 36). It gives us concrete examples of what it looks like to have faith in Jesus as he demonstrates his authority in various realms. It contrasts faith with a wrong fear of Jesus which refuses to have faith in him (4:40, 5:15, 5:37).

STRUCTURE

4:35-41	Trust Jesus who rules over nature
5:1-20	Trust Jesus who rules over Satan
5:21-43	Trust Jesus who rules over death

1. TRUST JESUS WHO RULES OVER NATURE (4:35-41)

Jesus once again establishes his identity and authority in these verses. The raging sea in the OT was always a symbol of chaos and forces opposing God (Ps 89:9, 104:7, Jonah 1:4, 15ff). It also symbolised the trials of the righteous one whose only help is God (Ps 46:1-3). The only one who is able to raise and calm the storm in the OT is God himself (Ps 107:23-30).

Therefore, the calming of the storm by Jesus with three words (v.39) is more than an impressive miracle. It is a demonstration of divine authority over nature. Mark emphasises just how powerful an action this is by the description of the force of the storm and its effects on the boat in v.37.

The question the disciples raise in v.41 is designed to prompt a similar question in the mind of Mark's reader. Answer: God himself.

But, at the heart of the incident is a contrast between faith and fear. The disciples in their fear question the concern of Jesus (v.38). He in turn questions their fear (v.40). The implication of his second question ('Have you still no faith?') is that if they had grasped his identity then they would have trusted him to calm the storm. It is unclear if the "great fear" of v.41 is a continuation of unbelief or an appropriate response to the revelation of Jesus' identity. Whichever, the focus of the incident is that Jesus is God, Lord of nature, so don't fear rather trust him.

2. TRUST JESUS WHO RULES OVER SATAN (5:1-20)

Again Mark is at pains to emphasise the scale of the problem facing the demon possessed man and hence the corresponding scale of the miracle Jesus performs (5:3-5, 9-13). To deliver this man from the grip of Satan will require divine power. Once again the miracle forces us to confront the authority and identity of Jesus.

Ironically, the demon recognises the identity of Jesus (v.7 cf. 1:24) in a way the disciples did not. Jesus has total control over these demons - they beg him (v.10, 12) and he gives them permission (v.13). The banishment into the pigs indicates the destructive nature of the demons as well as the power of Jesus.

Mark ends the incident with a deliberate contrast between the herdsmen/people (v.14-17) and the restored demoniac (v.18-20). The herdsmen 'go and tell' (v.14) and similarly the demoniac 'goes and tells' (v.20). The telling of the herdsmen results in the people of the region being afraid of Jesus (v.15) and 'begging' Jesus to leave their neighbourhood (v.17). In contrast the healed demoniac 'begged' to go with Jesus (v.18) but Jesus sends him to go and tell all that Jesus has mercifully done for him. The demoniac, in obedient faith, does exactly as he has been told in v.20 and the result is 'everyone marvelled'. The reason Jesus tells the man to go and tell when he has been at pains to silence others (1:25, 44, 3:12, 5:43) is probably that he is in pig-keeping gentile territory where the chance of a misguided messianic movement is minimal.

Mark is asking us, "Will you fear Jesus and send him away or trust Jesus and do as he says?"

3. TRUST JESUS WHO RULES OVER DEATH (5:21-43)

Here Mark characteristically recounts two incidents as a sandwich (cf. 3:20-35). We assume he wants the two to commentate on one another. Once again the scale of the problem faced by the two subjects is emphasised (v.23, 25-26, 35). Jesus must demonstrate divine power and authority if they are to be healed.

The healing of the woman with a flow of blood functions to slow down the arrival of Jesus at Jairus's house. When Jairus first meets Jesus his daughter is at the point of death (v.23) but when Jesus eventually reaches the house the little girl is dead. Jairus demonstrates faith in coming to Jesus believing that he can heal his daughter (v.23) and is encouraged by Jesus not to fear but to carry on believing when the news of her death arrives (v.36). Jesus raises the little girl from the dead in response to Jairus's faith.

Notice the healing is immediate (v.42) and public (v.40). The only raisings from the dead in the OT by Elijah and Elisha were clearly performed by God in answer to their prayers (1 Kings 17:17-24, 2 Kings 4:32-35). Jesus does not pray - he heals with his own word. The implication is obvious - Jesus is God.

The healing of the woman follows a similar pattern - if Jairus has faith and his daughter is made well then the woman also has faith and is made well (v.34). Notice, she comes in fear to Jesus (v.33) but Jesus sends her away (v.34 cf. v.19) in peace. The pivot on which the two incidents turn appears to be the saying of Jesus in v.36, 'Do not fear, only believe'.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- Why do I fail to trust Jesus? How can I trust Jesus more?

MARK 6:1-30

AIM

- To see the consequences of rejecting the teaching of Jesus.

CONTEXT

Mark has announced and established the kingly authority and priority of Jesus to heal, preach and forgive sinners (chapters 1-2). The arrival of Jesus begins a new era and marks the calling of a new people (chapter 3). The parable of the sower (chapter 4) is pivotal to all that follows since it emphasises the necessity of listening to and accepting the authoritative words of Jesus. The incidents in chapter 5 demonstrate what it looks like to listen to and accept the word of Jesus. They paint a picture of faithful acceptance in contrast to fearful rejection.

In marked contrast chapter 6 begins with a sequence of incidents demonstrating the negative dimension of the parable of the sower. The three stories focus on the rejection of Jesus (v.1-6) and his authoritative witnesses (apostles and prophets v.7-30). The stories make clear the consequences of rejecting their teaching.

The stories also continue to press the theme of the identity of Jesus (see the questions in 6:1-3) and the authority of Jesus (6:7).

STRUCTURE

- 1-6 Rejecting Jesus
- 7-13 Rejecting the apostles
- 14-30 Rejecting the prophet

1. REJECTING JESUS (6:1-6)

This section finds Jesus in his home town (v.1) and pointedly begins and ends with him teaching (v.2a, v.6b). Mark clearly wants to highlight the response Jesus receives to his teaching. We assume that Jesus was preaching the message which was summarised for us in 1:15 and calling people to repentance as a result.

Mark outlines the developing response to Jesus:

i. Astonishment (v.2)

The crowd's astonishment is rooted in an inability to see beyond Jesus as the 'carpenter's son'. They fail to recognise Jesus as God's king and instead only see his family connections. Hence, they take...

ii. Offence (v.3b)

Jesus does not appear to be shocked by this response. In v. 4 he gives a proverbial saying which once more portrays his family in a negative way (cf. 3:20-21, 31-35). In contrast his true family are those who do the will of God (3:25) and accept him in faith for who he truly is.

Christ's apparent inability to do miracles in the place does not result from a lack of power on his behalf (he does do some miracles (v.5b)). Rather it results from the lack of faith he finds in the town. The parable of the sower has shown us the importance of faith and chapter 5 made it concrete for us. No faith, no recognition of the identity of Jesus, no miracles. Jesus judges their lack of faith in him.

iii. Unbelief (v.6)

The incident ends with Jesus marvelling at their unbelief. The consequence is that he leaves them and goes to other villages to teach. Rejection does not mean that the mission of Jesus is thwarted. Instead it means that Jesus goes and teaches elsewhere. Again, the parable of the sower is being worked out - 4:24, "For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away".

2. REJECTING THE APOSTLES (6:7-13)

The sending of the twelve (cf. 3:13-19) in many ways shadows the treatment of Jesus in his home town. They are given authority by Jesus to exorcise unclean spirits (v.7) and this authority is worked out in v.12-13 alongside the preaching of repentance.

In between, Jesus prepares them for the reaction they will receive. He is particularly concerned to give them instructions on how to respond when they are rejected. V. 11 describes the refusal of a town to 'receive' them or to 'listen' to them. They are to shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against them implying that they are to leave the town and preach elsewhere (cf. 6:6).

Therefore, the apostles are given a specific task by Jesus. Their actions and words bear his authority. To reject their teaching is to reject his teaching. To reject them is to reject him. The consequence of rejecting them is that their teaching is withdrawn (v.11 cf. 4:24).

3. REJECTING THE PROPHET (6:14-30)

In v. 14-16 Mark seems to set up a contrast with 8:27-29. The latter passage results in a correct assessment of the identity of Jesus whereas the former passage results in rejection of his prophet and thus him too.

John the Baptist, like Jesus and the apostles, has been preaching repentance to Herod (v.18 cf. 1:4). Herod's response to John is once again mixed - he fears him and keeps him safe (v.20a). Yet when it comes to the crucial activity of listening to his words (v.20b cf. 4:20), Herod is greatly perplexed even though he hears him gladly. He appears to be one to whom the meaning is hidden and who will not understand (cf. 4:12). When Herodias's daughter asks for John's head, Herod expresses sorrow (v.26) but ultimately considers his own word more important than John's. The result is that John is rejected in a final way - he is killed. There will be no more teaching for Herod.

Mark is probably suggesting a parallel between the killing of John and the final killing of Jesus. If this is what happens to the servant then what will happen to the master (cf. 1:7)? See once again the parallel in 8:27-30, which is immediately followed by a prediction by Jesus of his death. Moreover, the conclusion of the story in 6:29 finds an echo in 15:42-47.

CONCLUSION

The pattern of Mark 6 appears to be the preaching of repentance by Jesus, the apostles and John. This call to repentance is rejected and results in the withdrawal of further teaching.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How does this challenge our thinking about Jesus/the apostles?
- How do we know if we are rejecting his teaching?

MARK 6:31-56

AIM

- To recognise Jesus as God who has come to rescue his people.

CONTEXT

Chapter 4 initiated a sequence of incidents which pointed to the necessity of listening to the words of Jesus and words about Jesus. Chapter 5 showed us what it looked like to have faith in Jesus. Chapter 6:1-30 showed us the consequences of rejecting the words of Jesus and refusing to repent. This sequence, seen from another perspective, fleshes out the preaching of Jesus in chapter 1:15, "Repent and believe the gospel".

So far Mark has told us a number of things about the identity of Jesus. He is, "Jesus Christ, Son of God" (1:1); he is God's king (1:9-11); he has divine authority as the Son of Man (2:1-12); he is the bridegroom (2:18-22) and the Lord of the Sabbath (2:28); he is the divine storm stiller (4:35-41); he is the prophet (6:4).

Mark has also told us about the task of Jesus. He has come to baptise with the Spirit (1:8); he has come to announce the kingdom (1:15); he has come to preach (1:38); he has come to cleanse and forgive sin as he calls sinners to himself (1:40-2:17); he has come to call a new people (3:13-35).

Chapter 6:31-56 introduces a new theme about the identity and task of Jesus. He is God come to fulfil the Old Testament promise of rescue for his people.

STRUCTURE

31-44 Jesus is God's promised shepherd rescuer

45-56 Jesus is God come to rescue

1. JESUS IS GOD'S PROMISED SHEPHERD RESCUER (6:31-44)

A first reading of this section will notice a number of themes we have seen before in Mark - Jesus has compassion on people (v.34 cf. 1:41) and does an extraordinary miracle. However, there are a number of clues in the passage which force us to see a fuller meaning beyond the establishment of the authority of Jesus. They fall into two categories:

i. Jesus as shepherd

Verse 34, "...they were like sheep without a shepherd" immediately establishes a connection with the OT. In 1 Kings 22 during the reign of the evil king Ahab, the prophet Micaiah describes Israel as, "...as sheep that have no shepherd". Therefore, the phrase refers to people who have no king or have been failed by their leaders.

This understanding is confirmed by the other major OT prophecy about God's people needing a shepherd in Ezekiel 34:

- Describes the failure of the shepherds of Israel (the religious leaders) to feed their flock (v.1-6).
- God promises judgement against the shepherds and promises to rescue his sheep (v.7-10).
- God promises to seek out his sheep, to rescue them, to gather them and to feed them on rich pasture (v.11-16).
- God promises that his great King, David, will be the one shepherd who will feed the sheep (v.23).

Therefore, as Jesus feeds the people of Israel (note the twelve baskets left in Mark 6:43) in Mark 6 he is laying claim to be the one kingly shepherd of God's people. He is the one who has come to seek out the lost sheep (cf. 2:17) and to rescue them.

ii. Jesus as rescuer

The other main OT allusion in Mark 6 is to the Exodus experience. Mark emphasises that the Jesus and the people find themselves in 'a desolate place' (v.31, 32, 35) which resonates with God's people in the desert following their rescue from Egypt.

Hence, it becomes increasingly significant that Jesus chooses miraculously to feed them in this place. God had done this for Israel in the wilderness as he provided quails and manna for them (Exodus 16). It is also significant that in Exodus 16 it is the manna/bread which is to be kept as a testimony to God's provision and deliverance (Exodus 16:31-36). Mark similarly foregrounds the bread as having particular significance (cf. 6:44, 52, 8:17-21). It is designed to teach that God has finally come to rescue his people. As Jesus feeds his people in the desert, they should understand that the final exodus has begun with his arrival.

2. JESUS IS GOD COME TO RESCUE (6:45-56)

This second incident complements the first since it too alludes back to the Exodus experience. Here are the clues:

- i. Notice v.48 Jesus walks on the water and, "...meant to pass by them". It is a strange thing to intend given the fact that he knows they are in trouble (v.48a). The phrase, given the Exodus context that has been established in v.30-44, must refer back to Exodus 33:17-34:9 where God promises Moses that his glory will 'pass by' him (33:22, 34:6). Therefore, Jesus must intend to reveal his glory to the disciples as he 'passes by' them in Mark 6:48.
- ii. Jesus intends to calm the disciples' fears with his words in v.50b, "Take heart; it is I" or "Take heart; I am". Jesus, again given the context, is probably alluding to the name God gives himself in Exodus 3:14, the name which guarantees that he will act to rescue his people.
- iii. The disciples are astounded in v.51 and the reason Mark gives in v.52 for their reaction is also significant - '...they did not understand about the loaves but their hearts were hardened.' The loaves were designed to teach them that Jesus was God come to rescue his people but they did not understand. Like ancient Israel in the desert their hearts were hardened (cf. Ex 34:9).

Mark's point is clear - Jesus is the God of the OT come to rescue his people. But, even the representatives of the new Israel do not get it. Their hearts are hardened. They have a big problem which Jesus will explain in chapter 7. For now it is enough to see that he will have to do something extraordinary to deal with their lack of understanding.

V. 53-56 summarise and form a bridge to get Jesus back to the populated region ready for his encounter with the Pharisees in chapter 7

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How does this enlarge our view of Jesus?
- How does this impact my view of myself and my need for Jesus to rescue me?

MARK 7:1-30

AIM

- To see that humanity's universal problem is a sinful heart but that Christ brings a universal rescue.

CONTEXT

Mark has introduced us to Jesus as God's authoritative King whose priority is to seek out sinners as he preaches the message of the kingdom (Ch1-3). He faces the opposition of both Satan and the Pharisees (1:12-13, 3:6) which points to the rejection of his message.

The parable of the sower in chapter 4 is a pivotal story. It establishes the necessity of listening to and understanding the words of Jesus. There are two groups of people - those on the inside and those on the outside. Chapters 5 introduces us to various groups of people who accept the words of Jesus in faith and then the first part of chapter 6 shows us the consequences of rejecting the words of Jesus.

The latter part of chapter 6 (31-56) introduces Jesus as the one who has come in fulfilment of the OT promises to lead his people in a second Exodus. He is God himself come to rescue his people.

Running throughout chapters 4-6 is a theme of understanding and misunderstanding which is tied to the presence of absence of faith (4:12-13, 40, 5:34, 36, 6:52). The Pharisees do not understand and reject Jesus in hostility; the disciples do not understand but nonetheless stick with Jesus (6:52ff). The new section we are about to enter explains the reason for the lack of understanding and prepares us for the major work Jesus will have to do to change our situation.

STRUCTURE

- 1-13 The confrontation with the Pharisees
- 14-16 The exhortation to the crowd
- 17-23 The explanation to the disciples
- 24-30 The demonstration to the Gentile woman

1. THE CONFRONTATION WITH THE PHARISEES (7:1-13)

We know that the appearance of the Pharisees and scribes is bound to be negative towards Jesus (cf. 3:6). Their issue with Jesus is the failure of his disciples to follow the traditions of the elders (v.5) as illustrated by their failure to wash their hands after being in the marketplace. This was not an issue of personal hygiene but rather had to do with ritual purity hence the language of 'defilement' (v.2, 5, 15, 18, 20, 23). Mark explains the practice of the Pharisees for us in v.3-4 - 'the traditions of the elders' were not part of the OT law but had been added to a list of ritual requirements over time.

Jesus makes the heart of his dispute with the Pharisees clear in v.6-8. They are more concerned with their hands than their hearts (v.6). Their hearts are far from God as they revere the commandments of men even as they reject the commandments of God (v.7-8).

Jesus gives a pointed illustration of how they do that in v.9-13. They are guilty of bypassing the commandment of God to honour their parents by hiding behind the man-made tradition of Corban - goods devoted to God which are no longer available for the care of parents. Corban, a tradition of the elders, makes void the commandment of God (v.13). Jesus is clear that this is only one of many such abuses (v.13b).

The quotation from Isaiah 29:13 in v. 6-7 is critical for the next two chapters. The verses that follow Is. 29:13 make plain that God will use his people's attachment to the traditions of men to do a new thing. Specifically it will be a time when the Gentiles (v.17 Lebanon) will have their deaf ears opened and blind eyes made to see (v.18-19). The poor among mankind (not just Israel) will exult in God (v.19) and the ruthless will come to nothing (v.20). We see this prophecy being worked out in the rest of Mark 7 and 8.

2. THE EXHORTATION TO THE CROWD (7:14-16)

Jesus turns his attention away from the Pharisees to the crowd and speaks to them in a parable (cf. v.17) before addressing his disciples privately. He is following the pattern established in 4:33-34.

He exhorts the crowd to hear him and to understand (v.14) again taking us back to the main themes of the parable of the sower.

The parable is a simple one but turns upside down the teaching of the Pharisees. The Pharisees saw their basic problem as 'outside-in' - contact with external 'defiled' items would defile them. Jesus, enigmatically says, "Actually, your problem is inside-out". At this point Jesus gives no explanation. He waits until he is alone with his disciples.

3. THE EXPLANATION TO THE DISCIPLES (7:17-23)

Again, the disciples don't seem to get it (v.17-18a) - there is a big problem with understanding. So, Jesus explains his parable. Nothing which goes into a man can defile him - it does not go into his heart but rather enters his digestive system and later is expelled via the body's natural processes (v.18b-19). The incidental explanation in v.19b functions in Mark as a demonstration of the authority of Jesus - he is 'Lord of the Food Laws' too (cf. 2:28).

In contrast, Jesus says it is what comes out of a person which defiles him (v.20). The catalogue of sins in v.21-22 are not the product of external influences rather they come out of the human heart (v.21a).

The Pharisees emphasis on the tradition of the elders has effectively obscured this reality. Their heart is far from God (v.6b) refusing to see that it is the problem.

Jesus indicates to his disciples that their problem is far bigger than they ever thought. Also, this appears to be a universal problem. The Gentiles were always seen as being in trouble since they were defiled by definition but now Jesus says that Jews too are in the same boat. All suffer from a sinful heart and need to be rescued.

4. THE DEMONSTRATION TO THE GENTILE WOMAN (7:24-30)

This incident can be included with v.1-23 or can be included with what follows. Jesus moves into Gentile territory in v.24 where the action continues up until 8:22. This is an argument for saying the incident belongs with what follows.

However, the incident of the Gentile woman gives us a demonstration that understanding is possible and that Jesus has come to rescue all kinds of people despite the universal problem of a sinful heart.

Mark stresses the woman's Gentile credentials (v.26). The reply Jesus gives her emphasises the priority of the mission to the Jews. The 'dog' reference is not necessarily pejorative - it is just a word picture indicating priority: dogs don't get food before children only after. The woman's reply in v.28 demonstrates understanding that Jesus is for everyone not just Israel.

Therefore, her request is granted and her daughter is delivered.

There is hope for all humanity in this woman's encounter with Jesus.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- What have we learned about Jesus from this section? How should we respond?
- What have we learned about ourselves?
 - What traditions of the leaders do we hold to which reject the commandments of God?
 - How do we see sin other than as a problem of our hearts?

MARK 7:24-8:30

AIM

- To see Jesus as the rescuer of Jew and Gentile from a sinful heart.
- To see the need for miraculous understanding in order to grasp the identity of Jesus.

CONTEXT

The parable of the sower in chapter 4 introduced the necessity of understanding the identity and teaching of Jesus (4:11-13). Jesus made it clear that careful listening would result in further revelation but deliberate rejection would result in judgement (4:24-25).

The Pharisees have deliberately rejected the message of Jesus (3:6) and in chapter 7:1-23 Jesus indicated that their problem is a sinful heart. But, the way he describes their problem makes it obvious that this is a universal human problem (7:21-23). The disciples still appear to have a problem understanding the message of Jesus (7:18). Therefore, we are left asking the questions, "Is it possible for the sinful heart to be changed? How will it happen? What will it take for anyone to understand who Jesus is?" Chapter 7:24-8:30 begin to give us an answer.

The quotation from Isaiah 29 in 7:6-7 becomes pivotal. It looks forward to a time when God will humble the supposed wise man (Is 29:14), bless the Gentiles (Is 29:17) and bring hearing to the deaf and sight to the blind (Is 29:18). The meek and poor of mankind will rejoice in Israel's God (Is 29:19) and those who oppose God will be silenced (Is 29:20). All these things occur in Mark 7:24-8:30.

STRUCTURE

A 7:24-30 Gentile understanding

B 7:31-37 Jesus heals the deaf Gentile

C 8:1-10 Jesus gives the Gentiles bread

D 8:11-13 The rejection of the Pharisees

C' 8:14-21 Disciples don't understand the bread

B' 8:22-26 Jesus heals the blind Jew

A' 8:27-30 Jewish understanding

A GENTILE UNDERSTANDING (7:24-30)

The geographical markers become significant in this whole section. Jesus moves into Gentile territory in v.24 and remains there until 8:10 (although we are not sure where Dalmanutha is - there is no other occurrence of this place name apart from here - the encounter with the Pharisees in v.11 suggests it's back in Jewish territory). Mark wants to parallel Gentile and Jewish needs and responses.

Mark makes much of the fact that the woman is a Gentile (v.26). He speaks to her in a parable (v.27) which should not be read as a derogatory put-down of Gentiles (the word for 'dog' is a respectable word!) Rather he is stressing the biblical priority of the Jewish nation through an everyday incident.

The remarkable thing about the encounter is that the woman understands the parable (v.28) and it is because of this statement that Jesus heals her daughter (v.29-30). The Gentile woman's understanding indicates she is on the inside of the kingdom (cf. 4:11). There is hope for Gentiles with sinful hearts!

B JESUS HEALS THE DEAF GENTILE (7:31-37)

The incident with the deaf, Gentile man confirms the conclusion reached through the incident with the Syro-phoenecian woman. It takes the miraculous intervention of Jesus for people to understand his identity. The time prophesied by Isaiah has arrived in Christ.

Notice that Jesus again attempts to silence the crowd (v.36). He does this again in 8:26 and 8:30. We assume this is because his self-revelation is not complete and therefore to proclaim him as King at this point would complicate his mission. See notes on 8:27-30 for more on this issue.

C JESUS GIVES THE GENTILES BREAD (8:1-10)

We must read this incident against the backdrop of 6:30-44 (see notes on that section). We learned there that Jesus was revealing himself as the one who had come to shepherd and to rescue Israel in a new Exodus. Therefore, 8:1-10 astonishingly tells us that the Gentiles are to be included in this new Exodus too.

Note the compassion of Jesus for the crowd (v.2-3 cf. 1:41, 6:34). Note too that the incident is clearly different to the incident in chapter 6 - Mark has not become confused. There are 7 loaves, four thousand people and 7 baskets.

D THE REJECTION OF THE PHARISEES (8:11-13)

These verses are full of irony. Jesus has performed numerous signs so far including the raising of the dead and the feeding of the 5000/4000. Yet, the Pharisees come in argumentative mood to ask him for a sign (v.11)! Jesus is clearly distressed (v.12a) and states that this generation (i.e. the Pharisees) will not be given a sign. They are deliberately without understanding and are now judged for that (cf. 4:12, 25). The fact that this brief encounter sits between Gentile and Jewish understanding and deliverance makes it all the more chilling. The Pharisees reject Jesus so he rejects the Pharisees.

C' DISCIPLES DON'T UNDERSTAND THE BREAD (8:14-21)

The disciples, for their part, do not appear to be wilfully uncomprehending. They are slow to understand but they aren't hostile to Jesus. The Pharisees reject Jesus whereas the disciples follow him. Nonetheless, they too have sinful hearts and do not understand.

Jesus warns them about the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod in v.15. We assume this refers to those who listen and yet reject the message (cf. 8:11-13, 6:14-29 see notes). But, the disciples don't get it - they are more concerned with their next meal (8:16). Jesus accuses them of lack of perception and understanding, of hard hearts (v.17 cf. 6:52), of spiritual blindness and deafness (v. 18 cf. 7:31-37). He then takes them back to the miraculous feedings (thus paralleling 8:1-10) and asks them the question about the leftovers. Both numbers peak of completion - 12 for all Israel, 7 a number of perfection. Jesus seems to want the disciples to grasp that he is God come to rescue the whole world. But, v.21, they do not understand. What will it take for them to get it?

B' JESUS HEALS THE BLIND JEW (8:22-26)

This incident tells us what it will take - Jesus must open blind eyes. Again, the incident is paralleled with 7:31-27 where Jesus indicates that Gentile understanding (7:24-30) only occurs through miraculous intervention.

Why does Jesus drag the healing out and not heal the blind man instantaneously with a word? It seems to be an acted parable. Revelation is gradual and understanding will be gradual. We will see how this works in the final section.

A' JEWISH UNDERSTANDING (8:27-30)

Jesus asks the question Mark has been posing throughout the Gospel so far (v.27). The crowds still don't get it (v.28) but Peter finally answers correctly. He understands. Jesus has miraculously opened his eyes. The opening verse and section of the gospel has reached its first climax.

But, Jesus charges Peter to tell no-one (v.30). Why? Jesus has not yet revealed how he will finally accomplish his work as the Christ. He has not shown how he will deal with the problem of a sinful heart. Peter sees but only 'men who look like trees walking' (cf. 8:24). Hence he still does not understand the full implications of Jesus' work as the Christ in 8:32. IF Peter had proclaimed Jesus as the Christ at this point it would have been the wrong Christ.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- What does this section tell us about Jesus?
- What does it tell us about ourselves?
- How does it impact the way we pray? Do evangelism?

MARK 8:31-9:1

AIM

- To see that the cross shapes the life of Jesus and his followers.

CONTEXT

We enter the second half of Mark's gospel at 8:31. The first half concluded in 8:29 with Peter's climactic confession of Jesus as the Christ. The second part of the Gospel will concern itself with Jesus as the Son of God climaxing with the confession of the centurion in 15:39. Both these confessions echo the opening verse of the gospel where Jesus is declared to be both Christ and Son of God.

However, the dominant theme of the second half of the gospel is the impending death and resurrection of Jesus. So far Jesus has been concerned to establish his kingship in his world through his words and deeds. He has not mentioned how he will ultimately deal with the sinful human heart or how he will finally overthrow Satan. All his miracles in these areas have been anticipatory of a greater more final victory and deliverance.

Mark 8:31-9:1 serves to introduce the death, resurrection and final rule of Jesus as a theme. It also introduces the kind of life the followers of Jesus are called to as a consequence of the work of Jesus.

STRUCTURE

31-33 The necessity of the way of the cross for Jesus

34-38 The necessity of the way of the cross for us

9:1 After the cross, glory!

1. THE NECESSITY OF THE WAY OF THE CROSS FOR JESUS (8:31-33)

Verse 31 is a bombshell. Nothing in the words of Jesus so far has prepared the disciples for this prediction. Mark has told us that the Pharisees are out to destroy Jesus (3:6) but Jesus has not indicated that this is inevitable. The prediction is remarkable for a number of reasons:

- Jesus calls himself Son of Man - a glorious, victorious figure in Daniel 7. To suggest this figure must die is astonishing!
- Jesus anticipates the resurrection. Therefore, his prediction is based on knowledge of the future not just an assumption that the Pharisees will destroy him.
- Jesus points to the leaders of old Israel as the ones who will do away with him.

Mark tells us that Jesus 'said this plainly' (v.32). He is not talking in parables (cf. 4:11) and yet Peter fails to understand. Peter wants Jesus to be a glorious, victorious Christ. The cross doesn't fit into his vision of who Jesus should be.

Jesus emphasises the necessity of the cross in v.33 - to try and bypass the cross is to go the way of Satan, is to set one's mind on the things of man. In contrast, to set one's mind on the things of God is to see the necessity of the cross for Jesus. No cross, no glory. No death, no resurrection. Peter speaks like Satan when he tells Jesus that the cross is not necessary.

The section indicates that Jesus does not give a final revelation of himself in chapters 1-8. This explains why he repeatedly tells people not to speak about what he has done in these chapters. They must grasp that he is a Christ who must die and rise again or else they will have a wrong view of his task.

2. THE NECESSITY OF THE WAY OF THE CROSS FOR US (8:34-38)

Jesus goes on to tell the crowd and disciples the implications of his death for the way they follow him. Christian discipleship is cross-shaped - it means taking up our cross and following Jesus.

It's important to pause and absorb how the original hearers would have understood Jesus. He has just spoken about his physical death. To follow this with a reference to taking up one's cross would have been understood as an invitation to come and die with him. Take care not to rush too quickly to spiritual applications. The cross at this point meant only one thing for Jesus's hearers - death. To follow Jesus means giving up everything, your physical life included. Any sacrifice, up to and including physical martyrdom, is to be expected if you follow Jesus.

Jesus goes on in v. 35-37 to explain the spiritual equation involved in this radical call. V. 35, to save one's life (i.e. to set your mind on the things of man and to avoid the cross) will mean ultimately you will lose it (i.e. you will not share in the resurrection to life which follows the cross cf. v.31). In contrast to lose your life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel (i.e. to set your mind on the things of God and to go the way of the cross) will mean that ultimately you will save your life (i.e. you will experience the resurrection to life which follows the cross).

V. 36 presses this spiritual logic home with two rhetorical questions: "what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" Nothing! What can a man give in return for his life?" Nothing!

V. 38 is a sober warning. To be ashamed of Jesus and his words (i.e. bypassing the way of the cross in favour of the things of man) now will result in the Son of Man being ashamed of you when he returns. Christian discipleship is shaped by the cross.

V. 38 also presses home the point that the Son of Man will appear as Daniel 7 anticipates - he will come in glory! The way of the cross is not the end for him or for his followers. By implication, Jesus is saying that **not** to be ashamed of him and his words will result in eternal glory for his followers. If they bear shame for his sake now then they will share his glory in the future.

3. AFTER THE CROSS, GLORY! (9:1)

You can imagine that the disciples might be left confused and uncertain by the words of Jesus. One moment Peter grasps that Jesus is the Christ and begins to think of the glorious reign of the Christ described in the OT, the next Jesus tells him that death must come first. How can they be certain that Jesus will appear in glory and powerfully reign in the kingdom of God?

Jesus reassures them with the promise of 9:1 and follows it with the experience of 9:2-8. To what does Jesus refer in 9:1? There are various options.

- a. The resurrection
- b. The ascension
- c. Pentecost
- d. The second coming

All have something to commend them although the latter option seems to be the least likely. Self evidently everyone listening to Jesus died long before his second coming. Some have interpreted this to mean that Jesus was mistaken. He expected the final kingdom to come very quickly and it did not. However, the promise must be read in context. The transfiguration comes immediately after the words of Jesus and most likely fulfils his words. See how in the next set of notes!

The main point of the section is to reassure confused disciples that after the cross there will be eternal glory for Jesus and his followers.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- What does this section teach us about Jesus? About us?
- In what ways do we avoid the cross in our lives? In what ways do we seek glory before the cross?

MARK 9:2-29

AIM

- To see that glory for Jesus and the Christian only comes after suffering.

CONTEXT

Jesus has responded to the confession of Peter in 8:29 by emphasising the necessity of the way of the cross for both him and his followers. The Christian must set his or her mind on the things of God not the things of man.

However, Peter appears to fail to grasp the necessity of the cross. Jesus interprets his opposition as the way of Satan (8:33). The cross is central to all Jesus has come to do and is central to all his followers will do.

Nonetheless, Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man (8:31, 38) - a glorious, victorious, divine figure introduced in Daniel 7. Hence, he gives his listeners an assurance that he will appear in glory as the Son of Man following his humiliation at the hands of the leaders of Israel (8:38-9:1). The healing of the demon possessed deaf/mute points to the kind of lifestyle demanded from the followers of Jesus.

STRUCTURE

- 9:1-8 An anticipation of the glorious final kingdom
- 9:9-13 A reaffirmation of the necessity of the cross
- 9:14-29 A call to dependent discipleship

1. AN ANTICIPATION OF THE GLORIOUS FINAL KINGDOM (9:1-8)

In this section we are introduced to the ones who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come in power.

The incident has strong OT overtones which give it added significance. There are particularly strong allusions to Exodus 24:

- v. 2 six days waiting followed by the revelation of God on the 7th (Ex 24:16)
- v.2 a high mountain to meet God (Ex 24:15)
- v.3, 7 a revelation of God's glory in a cloud (Ex 24:17)
- v.7 God speaks out of the cloud (Ex 24:16)

If Exodus marks a high water mark in the revelation of God to his people in the OT then this incident is meant to indicate an even higher mark. The glory of God is seen in Jesus as evidenced by the transformation of his clothing (v.3). The appearance of Elijah and Moses (v.4), the two great prophets and agents of revelation in the OT, signifies the status of Jesus as **the** prophet of God. The voice from the cloud echoes the statement of 1:11 but in contrast here the voice addresses Peter, James and John not Jesus. They are told to **listen** to Jesus. His uniqueness and supremacy is stressed by the fact that they are left alone with him in v.8 - Elijah and Moses are no more.

The emphasis on listening to Jesus means that he must be allowed to interpret his messianic mission to them. It is not enough to confess Jesus as Christ - they must listen to his words about his death and resurrection too. Their final apostolic ministry will depend on this.

The incident shows that Jesus will one day be glorified - he will be raised from the dead (8:31b) and will judge the whole earth in glory (8:38) but not yet. The disciples are shown enough to tell them that it will happen. The words of Jesus are to be determinative in showing them how and when it will happen (9:7b). They will witness his resurrection and ascension and in all these things be assured that God's glorious kingdom will one day come in all its fullness.

2. A REAFFIRMATION OF THE NECESSITY OF THE CROSS (9:9-13)

Jesus charges the three not to tell anyone what they have seen until after the resurrection (v.9a). Again we assume this is because he does not want people to put glory before suffering. Interestingly, the disciples don't understand the resurrection yet but are content to obey Jesus (v.9b).

The question of v.11 naturally flows out of the scene they have just witnessed. If Jesus will be the one to usher in the great and glorious day of the Lord then what about the OT promise that Elijah will come first to prepare the way (cf. Malachi 4:5-6)?

Jesus affirms that the promise of Malachi has been fulfilled - Elijah has come to restore all things (Cf. Mal 4:6, Mark 1:4-5) but v.13 has been treated badly. We assume this is a reference to the ministry of John the Baptist (cf. 6:14-28). In the same way 'Elijah/John' was abused so must the Son of Man be abused (v.12). Again, Jesus seems to be reaffirming the precedence of suffering over glory. The final day of the Lord will only come after the Son of Man has suffered.

NOTE: where is it 'written' that the new Elijah will suffer (v.13)? None of the OT prophecies contain a reference to his suffering. Therefore we assume that this refers to the historical suffering of the original Elijah at the hands of a wicked king and his wife. Jesus sees this as anticipating the sufferings of 'Elijah/John' at the hands of another wicked king and his wife (6:14-28).

3. A CALL TO DEPENDENT DISCIPLESHIP (9:14-29)

This healing miracle obviously has considerable significance given the amount of space Mark devotes to it immediately after the transfiguration. What is its purpose here?

Mark contrasts the faithlessness of the disciples who have been unable to exorcise the boy (v.18-19) with the growing belief of the boy's father (v.24). The disciples exemplify a 'faithless generation' (v.19) whereas the man exemplifies a simple dependence on Jesus.

Jesus emphasises the necessity of totally depending on him in v.23 - "all things are possible for one who believes [in me]" and in v.29 - "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer". The boy's father depends on Jesus in simple prayer (v.24) whereas the implication of v.29 is that the disciples have not been doing this.

This theme appears to take us back to 8:34-37. The lifestyle Jesus demands from his followers is one of radical self-abandonment. The way of the cross, the way of self-denial is expressed in prayerful dependence on Jesus. Before glory comes self-sacrifice.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- What does this passage tell us about Jesus? About us?
- How do we listen to the words of Jesus now? How do we express self-denial through prayer?
- Is part of the application of this section, "Read your Bible and pray every day?"

MARK 9:30-50

AIM

- To see that the way of the cross is to be last of all and servant of all.

CONTEXT

Jesus has begun a new section of teaching at 8:31. He has introduced his disciples to the idea that he will have to suffer, die and then rise again. This pattern of suffering then glory will also be the pattern of their discipleship. They are invited to take up their crosses, deny themselves and to follow him (8:34).

The transfiguration has assured them that Jesus will one day come in glory. The interlude about Elijah once more emphasises that this will happen only after he has suffered (9:11-13). Their part is to live life in prayerful, believing dependence until then (9:23, 29).

However, the disciples are slow to understand since they still imagine Jesus to be only about glory. They cannot grasp the need for suffering. Hence, Peter rebukes Jesus (8:32), they don't understand the rising from the dead (9:10) and they are unable to cast out the demon (9:18) since they do not depend on Jesus. They are still acting as if they are part of the 'faithless generation' (9:19). Jesus in healing the deaf-mute boy illustrates once more the powerful work he will have to do on the cross to change their situation.

In this next section, Jesus carries on correcting misunderstandings of his work (9:32) and the nature of discipleship (9:33-34, 38). Once more the emphasis is on the difference the cross makes to the way the disciples of Jesus live their lives in relation to others (9:35-37, 42, 50).

STRUCTURE

30-37 Be last of all and servant of all

38-50 Be at peace with one another

1. BE LAST OF ALL AND SERVANT OF ALL (9:30-37)

Jesus again predicts his death and resurrection (v.31) but the disciples do not understand what he is talking about (v.32). This lack of understanding becomes evident in v.33-34 where Jesus catches them playing a power game about who is the greatest. They still don't understand what it means to take up their crosses and go after Jesus.

[Incidentally, Jesus knows what the disciples are talking about even though they don't tell him. His teaching addresses their problem. This is God's all-knowing King.]

In v. 35 Jesus convenes a formal rabbinical teaching seminar. He sits down (the classic stance of the rabbi) and calls the twelve to him (again, standard rabbinical practice). This formality indicates that the teaching he is about to give is extremely significant. It also intensifies the drama he is about to enact.

Jesus teaches them that the way of the cross is not to argue over who is the greatest ie. to be first. Rather the way of the cross is to 'be last of all and the servant of all'. This will now become the dominant teaching motif about discipleship until it is repeated in 10:31 and then climaxes when Jesus applies it to both their discipleship and his work on the cross in 10:43-45.

Discussions about who is the greatest are completely out of order when following Jesus. The opposite stance is required - I am last and servant of all.

Jesus dramatises this point in a shocking way in v.36. Children had no social status in first century Palestine. They were at the bottom of the social ladder. They certainly had no place in a formal rabbinical seminar. Yet Jesus chooses to embrace a child in the middle of his teaching. He wants his disciples to know that this is the kind of self-humbling which is required to go the way of the cross. True followers will be prepared to serve the 'nobodies' of this world since they are so unconcerned about their own status.

The interpretation Jesus gives in v.37 is just as shocking. To live life in this way (i.e. the way which is prepared to serve even children in the name of Jesus) is to receive Jesus himself and in receiving Jesus to receive his Father. To be last and servant of all is to receive God himself. The radical self-denial of the way of the cross is the way of entry into the kingdom.

2. BE AT PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER (9:38-50)

This section begins with the disciples getting it wrong again. The connection with the previous section is that Jesus has taught them about who they should receive in v.37 and now John raises a question in v.38 about a man they have failed to receive.

The focus of John's complaint is significant. They tried to stop the man exorcising in the name of Jesus 'because he was not following us' (v.38). John is again overly concerned with pecking orders and hierarchies. Jesus speaks up in support of the man and in opposition to the actions of the disciples (v.39). The fact that the man is able to do mighty works in the name of Jesus suggests that he will not speak evil of Jesus (v.39). Therefore, he is not to be stopped since his words and actions reveal him to be for Jesus rather than against him (v.40).

In the wider context, the disciples have been unable to perform exorcisms in 9:18 and Jesus says it is because they fail to prayerfully depend on him (9:29). Therefore, the assumption must be that this man is prayerfully depending on Jesus in order to perform exorcisms in his name. Hence he is to be received. V. 41 reinforces the teaching of v.37 - to receive and care for the disciples of Jesus will be to receive Jesus himself and thus to demonstrate that one has an eternal reward.

The disciples are in danger of rejecting little ones (like the exorcist) since they refuse to become the servants of all. Their desire for self-importance has led them to try to stop the man doing the work of Christ and hence to sin. Hence, Jesus issues the severe warning of v.42-50. To refuse to receive 'little ones' is to refuse Christ and hence is to place oneself in danger of hell. Jesus describes the horrors of hell in graphic language (v.43-48 cf. our anaemic, abstract description of hell as 'separation from God'). Jesus says do whatever is necessary to prevent you causing little ones to sin. In the context this must mean the death of pride which refuses to recognise other Christians and hence refuses to recognise Christ.

[Sometimes this passage is used to support strategies for avoiding 'unhelpful' films or TV programmes or the avoidance of 'unhelpful' places etc. This does not seem to be it's primary focus. We diminish its scathing attack on our pride if we reduce to these categories.]

Jesus concludes his warnings about the avoidance of hell in v. 49 with a reminder that 'everything will be salted with fire'. It is a reminder that there will be final judgement where salt is seen as a cleansing/purging agent. V. 50 is an encouragement to pre-empt the final judgement. To pridefully reject a true brother is to live an 'uncleansed lifestyle', it is to lack salt. Therefore, Jesus encourages his disciples in v.50b to 'have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.' To have salt is to reject pride and will result in harmonious relationships. These relationships are in contrast to the prideful rejection of v.38. This is what it looks like to be last and servant of all. This is what it looks like to deny self and take up our cross to follow Jesus.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- In what ways do we try and 'be first' in a wrong way?
- Who do we exclude who we should include and why?
- How can we take the warnings of Jesus more seriously?
- How can we make sure that we live at peace with one another?

MARK 10:1-31

AIM

- To see that hardness of heart makes it impossible to enter the kingdom of God unless God intervenes to make it possible.

CONTEXT

Jesus is continuing to teach his disciples that he must die and be raised again (8:31, 9:31). They are struggling to understand what he is talking about (8:32, 9:11, 32) probably because they have a vision of a triumphant messiah/king who does not suffer. Jesus must die because of the desperate state of humanity (9:17-18, 6-27).

Jesus is also stressing to his disciples the need for his death to shape their discipleship. If he is to die then they are to die too (8:34). This cross-shaped life is the way to final glory (8:35-38, 9:35). But, the disciples are still wanting to play games of power and status (9:34, 38) again probably because they misunderstand the work of Christ.

We have been given a number of examples of the kind of discipleship Jesus demands in order to enter his kingdom. It is one of total prayerful dependence on him (8:29), a self-humbling which is prepared to serve anyone for the sake of Christ and a humble, peaceful acceptance of other believers (9:35, 39, 50).

Jesus has warned too about the terrible consequences of refusing to go the way of the cross (8:38, 9:42-49).

In chapter 10 many of these themes are developed further.

STRUCTURE

1-12 The danger of a hard heart

13-16 The need for humble heart

17-26 The need for a powerful work of God

1. THE DANGER OF A HARD HEART (10:1-12)

Jesus continues to teach the crowds (v.1) reminding them (and us) of his priority to preach (1:38) and the necessity of listening to God's word through him (4:1-25, 9:7).

The Pharisees reappear on the scene (v.2) in order to 'test' Jesus. We know this a trap because of the Pharisees' expressed desire to destroy Jesus (3:6). The incident in context is designed to teach us a negative. Jesus has just encouraged his disciples to be at peace with one another and now immediately we encounter the Pharisees who are refusing to live at peace with Jesus and his disciples. They are refusing to 'receive' Jesus (9:37) and therefore are in danger of the judgement of 9:42ff.

The presenting issue is divorce (v.2) but the deeper issue is hardness of heart which refuses to listen to or obey God (v.5). There is no need for Jesus or Mark to introduce teaching about divorce at this point unless a wider issue is at stake. Hence don't get too distracted by a debate on divorce rather see the deeper issue at stake

[DIVORCE: Jesus appears to take an absolutist line on divorce here ie. no divorce is ever allowable in any circumstances. However, this is not the only place where the Jesus and the Bible address divorce. Other texts qualify the absolutism of Jesus e.g. in Matt 5:32 Jesus clearly allows for divorce in cases of sexual immorality, in 1 Cor 7:15 Paul allows for divorce when a non-believer deserts a believer. There is a case to be made which says that both of these exceptions (sexual immorality and desertion) are non-exhaustive examples of behaviour which breaches the marriage covenant and therefore open the door to divorce. The question then becomes "why the strong prohibition of divorce in Mark 10?" so back to the main action!]

The Pharisees want to test Jesus but the answer Jesus gives them exposes their true motives. It seems that they are more concerned with evading the word of God than keeping it. Jesus makes it clear that Moses made provision for inevitable human failure due to a hard heart (v.5) but God's desire from the beginning was for life-long marriages.

He wants married people to live at peace with one another (9:50). The Pharisees seem to treat this as an issue for debate. Jesus presses home the seriousness of the issue of listening to God and obeying him to his disciples in 10:10-12. In context, to be concerned with how I can evade God's law is to refuse to live at peace and is to refuse to be servant of all. It's an assertion of selfish rights (cf. 9:34, 38).

2. THE NEED FOR HUMBLE HEART (10:13-16)

Jesus has already used the reception of children as an example of what it means to be servant of all (9:36). Children had no social status in first century Palestine hence for a rabbi to receive them indicated radical self-humbling.

This reading is confirmed in v.13 where the disciples rebuke those trying to get their children blessed by Jesus. They assume that Jesus is too great to humble himself in this way and therefore they show once more that they have not grasped the way of kingdom discipleship.

Jesus invites the children to come to him echoing the teaching of 9:37 - to be humble enough to receive a child in Christ's name is to receive God himself. V. 15 is sometimes read as saying that we should receive the kingdom in the same way that a child receives it. This reading involves importing some idea about children into the text eg their humility, their innocence, their powerlessness etc. The problem is that those things are rarely universally true of children - they are usually bourgeois Western views of the supposed virtues of children developed in the last 150 years. Jesus does not draw attention to anything about the children. The focus is all on his act of self-humbling in receiving them. Hence the verse should be read, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like one receives a child shall not enter it". The Greek allows for this reading and it fits better contextually - the section climaxes with Jesus receiving the children in his arms and blessing them. Radical humility is the key to the kingdom.

3. THE NEED FOR A POWERFUL WORK OF GOD (10:17-26)

Our reading of the Pharisees problem and the reception of the children is confirmed by the next incident. The young man, for all his goodness (v.20), refuses to listen to Jesus (v.22) and goes away from him (rather than following him). He clings to his wealth and is not prepared to deny himself and go the way of the cross. He gains the world but forfeits his life (8:36).

Jesus pinpoints wealth as a particular problem for those who want to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus constantly warns about the danger of great wealth - it easily becomes a God (cf. Luke 16:13). The disciples are amazed (v.24) since great wealth was seen as a sign of God's blessing. If the rich man can't enter then who can? Jesus presses it home - it's not just difficult, it's impossible (v.25). The only way someone can enter the kingdom of God is through a divine miracle (v.27). His miracles so far have prepared us for this (e.g. 8:22-26) in the realm of understanding but here he seems to be speaking about something far greater. This is entry into the kingdom itself - we are being prepared for the necessity of the cross where God makes possible the impossible.

Peter follows up with an assertion that they have done the right thing (v.28). I don't think we need necessarily read Peter as being self-righteous. It's a statement of fact to this point - they have given up family and work to follow Jesus. Jesus encourages his disciples with the promise that to follow him will result in gaining life in this age and the age to come (cf. 4:25, 8:35). Verse 31 summarises the teaching - many who are first will be last and the last first. The rich man is first and yet will be last (since he refuses to go the way of the cross and follow Jesus), the disciples are last and yet will be first (since they have gone the way of the cross and have followed Jesus).

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How do we try and evade listening to Jesus?
- What things prevent us from following Jesus as we ought?
- How do we see the promise of Jesus in v.29-30 being fulfilled now?

MARK 10:32-52

AIM

- To see the way of the cross for Jesus is to be a ransom for many bearing God's wrath.
- To see that the way of the cross for us is to be slave of all trusting in Jesus.

CONTEXT

Jesus has made clear that he is to die and rise again (8:31, 9:31). However, so far he has not indicated the purpose of his death and resurrection. The new section we are about to approach begins to explain the purpose of his death particularly against the backdrop of the OT.

Jesus has also made clear that the way of discipleship is shaped by the cross (8:34). It is a way of humble servanthood (9:35, 10:15, 31). To refuse to go this way is to refuse to follow Jesus, is to fail to enter the kingdom of God (8:38, 9:42ff, 10:15, 21-22). However, to follow Jesus is to know great blessing in this age and the age to come (8:35, 10:29-31). Suffering must precede glory but there are blessings even in the life of suffering.

In our next section Jesus will continue to stress and focus on these themes.

STRUCTURE

- 32-34 The victorious king will die in Jerusalem
- 35-45 The victorious king will die on behalf of his people
- 46-52 The victorious king must be trusted

1. THE VICTORIOUS KING WILL DIE IN JERUSALEM (10:32-34)

Jesus now predicts his death and resurrection for the third time (cf. 8:31, 9:31). However, this is not mere repetition. There are significant additions:

- i. We are told that all this will take place in Jerusalem (v.32, 33), the centre of Jewish cultural and religious life.
- ii. Jesus is pictured as leading a great crowd up to Jerusalem (v.32, v.46) which includes the formerly blind (v.52). Mark is wanting us to recall Isaiah 35 where God comes to save his people (Is 35:4), the eyes of the blind are opened (35:5) and the ransomed of the Lord joyfully make their way on a highway to Zion/Jerusalem (35:8-10). Their destination will result in the removal of sorrow and sighing (35:10). Therefore, the death of Jesus is far more than a political gesture or mistake. Mark presents it to us as the fulfilment of the OT's promise of a Messiah come to deliver his people into the new age. This explains the amazement and fear in v.32.
- iii. We are also told for the first time that the death of Jesus will be as a result of a judicial process ('condemn' in v.33 is a judicial word) and that the Gentiles will be involved too (v.33). He will die as if he was a 'sinner'. The responsibility for the death of Jesus is universal.

2. THE VICTORIOUS KING WILL DIE ON BEHALF OF HIS PEOPLE (v.35-45)

Mark deliberately links this episode with the one which immediately follows it by repeating the question, "What do you want me to do for you?" (v.36, v.51). We are being invited to compare and contrast the answers given by James and John and the blind man.

The disciples are still hung up on getting the place of honour and glory (v.37). They clearly believe that Jesus will one day be enthroned in glory and therefore are to be commended. But, they still haven't grasped the necessity for the cross in the life of Jesus or their own life.

The answer Jesus gives them reveals their ignorance (v.38a "You do not know what you are asking") and goes on in two images to further reveal the purpose of his death.

- i. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" The cup Jesus alludes to is the cup of God's wrath against sin

(cf. Jeremiah 25:15-29, 49:12) For Israel to return from exile the cup must be taken from her (Isaiah 51:17-23). Jesus is affirming that he will drink it - his death is wrath bearing. In Mark 14:36 he asks for the cup to be removed from him - it is a terrible thing.

ii. "Are you able to be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?" Being overwhelmed with water is also an OT image for God's wrath and judgement (Gen 6:17, Ex 14:21-28) through which his people are saved (Gen 7:1, Ex 14:29, Is 43:2 cf. 1 Peter 3:20-21). In Psalm 69:2, 15 the Davidic king calls on God to save him from the waters. Jesus is saying that he will bear God's judgement in order to save his people from it.

Jesus asks James and John if they are able to drink this cup and be baptised with this baptism. They assure him they are able (v.39) and Jesus assures them that they will drink and be baptised (v.39). In what sense does he mean this? There are a couple of possibilities:

i. Jesus is alluding to the future suffering of the disciples when they will be persecuted and die for his sake. This fits the broader context where discipleship is cross-shaped (8:34) - as Jesus goes so go the disciples. However, it doesn't fit with the unique wrath bearing death of Jesus. James and John will not drink the cup in this unique way.

ii. Jesus is alluding to the fact that he will die on their behalf and in this sense they will drink and be baptised 'in him and with him'. This fits with the immediate context where Jesus is about to tell them that he will die as a ransom for many (v.45).

It's not his concern who will sit in the places of honour (v.40) since his focus is his death. The rest of the disciples hear what James and John have been up to and are indignant (v.41) - they are still not being at peace with one another (9:50) because they have not grasped the way of the cross. Jesus once again has to teach them that the way of discipleship, the way of greatness in the kingdom is to be slave of all (v.44). He is the great example of that - even the Son of Man (with all the powerful imagery of Daniel 7) came to serve (v.45).

But, his service is more than an example to follow. It is also a unique ransom which makes discipleship possible. The language of ransom is rich with OT associations.

i. The Passover event and commemorative feast stressed the need for a ransom to avert God's wrath (Ex 11:1-12:42). To belong to Israel involved paying a ransom in money (Ex 30:12ff).

ii. The Day of Atonement acted out ransom in the fate of the two goats bearing and dying for sin (Lev 16).

iii. The great servant songs of Isaiah point to the one who would come and die as a final ransom (Is 53), many nations will be 'sprinkled' through him (Is 52:13-15) and the 'ransomed of the Lord' shall return to Zion with him (Is 35:10).

Therefore, the death of Jesus secures discipleship as well as shapes discipleship.

3. THE VICTORIOUS KING MUST BE TRUSTED (10:46-52)

The blind man stands in deliberate contrast to the disciples. They want glory (10:37), he wants mercy (v.47-48). In faith he asks Jesus to heal him and Jesus tells him that his faith has made him well (lit. 'saved him'). Notice, the blind man follows Jesus on the way - he is a true disciple, ransomed and on his way to Zion (cf. Is 35).

Jesus does not tell him to stay silent about what has happened to him (cf. 1:44, 3:12 etc) or not to follow him (5:18-19). We assume that Bartimaeus has grasped the whole picture. Jesus is King ('Son of David v.47-48) but a king on his way to die as a ransom in Jerusalem. Bartimaeus stand in contrast to the disciples - it will take a miracle to get them to see all that Jesus will do for them and to follow him like this.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- What new things does this passage teach us about the death of Jesus for us?
- How does this understanding move us to a fresh grasp of discipleship?

MARK 11:1-25

AIM

- To see Jesus as the triumphant king judging old Israel but promising deliverance to all who will have faith in him.

CONTEXT

On three occasions in the last three chapters Jesus has predicted his death (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34). The final prediction has been the most specific so far - it identifies Jerusalem as the place of his death and implicates both Jew and Gentile in his judicial ('condemn') execution. His death will involve bearing the wrath and judgement of God on sin (10:38). But, it will also be a ransom for many (10:38 baptism is a means of deliverance as well as judgement, 10:45). Jesus will die on behalf of others.

Jesus has also outlined the way of discipleship for his followers. It is one of self-sacrifice (8:34ff), service (9:35) and slavery (10:43). In order to enter the kingdom they must give up everything (10:21) and self-humble in the way one would self-humble to receive a child (10:15).

This radical self-humbling seems impossible for the disciples who are continually interested in glory without suffering and self-denial (8:32, 9:34, 38, 10:37). But, Jesus presses it further - it is impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom left to themselves but with God it is possible (10:27). God can create faith in Jesus as God's king and open blind eyes to see him as such (10:46ff). Faith in Jesus is at the heart of receiving all he is about to do and at the heart of entering the kingdom through his death.

Our next section sees Jesus entering Jerusalem as king, judging old Israel who refuse to have faith in him and holding out the way of faith as the way of salvation. The passage also introduces a new section in the gospel centred on the temple in Jerusalem (11:1-13:36).

STRUCTURE

- 1-11 The king enters Jerusalem
- 12-21 The king judges the temple
- 22-25 The king offers forgiveness

1. THE KING ENTERS JERUSALEM (11:1-11)

Jesus now approaches and enters Jerusalem where the rest of Mark's gospel will be set. Mark signals the importance of the Mount of Olives by bookending this section with references to it (11:1, 13:3).

The sequence with the colt (v.2-7) demonstrates Jesus's sovereignty in the situation. He will enter Jerusalem on his terms and in total control of events. In view of the way things will turn out this is an important statement.

It also introduces the prophecy from Zechariah 9:9-13 where Israel's messianic King comes to Jerusalem riding on the colt of a donkey. According to the prophecy he comes to bring peace to the nations (Zech 9:10) and freedom and restoration to Israel (Zech 10:11-12). Notably, he will do this "...because of the blood of my covenant with you..." (Zech 10:11). This phrase will be picked up by Jesus in Mark 14:24 as he celebrates the Lord's Supper in anticipation of his death.

The crowd's response to Jesus in v.7-11, as he enters Jerusalem on the colt, further presses home the point that this is the messianic king come to begin his reign. He is recognised as the one who will bring about, "...the coming kingdom of our father David..." (v.10). Therefore, celebration and acclaim are totally appropriate.

2. THE KING JUDGES THE TEMPLE (11:12-21)

Mark now structures his material with a 'sandwich' which is typical of his style (cf. 3:20-35). The material in the middle of the sandwich (in this case the cleansing of the temple in v.15-19) interprets and is interpreted by the material which surrounds it (in this case the cursing of the fig tree in v.12-14 and v.20-21).

Jesus is not behaving like a spoiled brat in v.12-14. He is deliberately showing his disciples the state of Israel and what will happen to her. In the OT God looked for fruit from the fig tree of Israel (Hos 9:10, Micah 7:1-6). Jesus sees leaves on the tree which would usually indicate fruit but he finds none so curses the tree. (Notice Mark makes much of the fact that the disciples 'heard it' v.14b - remember the importance of listening to Jesus 9:7?). He will return to the meaning of the cursed fig tree in v.20ff but it seems that it is to do with the cursing of old Israel.

The incident in the temple which immediately follows makes that clear. Jesus enters Jerusalem, the focal point of Jewish life and heads straight to the temple, the focal point of religious life. This was the symbolic dwelling place of God on earth where sacrifices and prayers were offered to God.

The money changing and pigeon selling activity was not wrong in and of itself. Atonement money had to be paid in a specific temple coinage (cf. Ex 30:11-16) and birds were prescribed as offerings for sin and uncleanness (Lev 5:7, 12:6,8, 14:22). It was easier to buy already approved birds in the temple courts than to buy them outside and risk having them rejected.

So, the problem is not temple commerce. The problem is that these things were leaves where God was looking for fruit. The temple has ceased to be a house of prayer - in v.17 Jesus quotes from Jeremiah 7:11. Jeremiah 7 paints a picture of a people who were using the temple as a guarantee of their safety (Jer 7:4) yet were neglecting the serious issues of life. They were oppressing the poor and worshipping other gods (Jer 7:5-6); like the Exodus generation they were making their offerings but refusing to obey God (Jer 7:21-24); like all the successive generations of Israel since they were refusing to listen to the words of the prophets (Jer 7:25-26 cf. Mark 12:1-12). This is a generation of God's wrath (Jer 7:29) and hence Jesus curses them.

The chief priests and scribes confirm this analysis since they are looking for a way to destroy him (v.18). Even the crowd who are astonished at his teaching will eventually turn against him (15:11ff).

The next day they see the fig tree again and Peter 'remembers' and points out that it has withered. This gives Jesus an opportunity to teach more.

3. THE KING OFFERS FORGIVENESS (11:22-25)

These verses are often taken out of context in order to teach a particular view of prayer e.g. "if you have enough faith then you can make amazing, miraculous things happen. If you pray for them and they don't happen then either you don't have enough faith or there is unforgiven sin in your life". This is pastorally disastrous and leads to despairing, disillusioned Christians!

The passage is not a general piece of teaching on the nature of prayer. In its context it must be to do with deliverance from the judgement which Jesus has just proclaimed on unbelieving Israel. Peter's exclamation in v.21 as he sees the withered fig tree elicits the response of Jesus in v.22, "Have faith in God". We've seen already in Mark that faith is the way to enter the kingdom (2:5, 4:40, 5:34, 36, 9:23, 10:52) and lack of faith in Jesus is the way to be kept out (10:21-22). Therefore, the encouragement to Peter to have faith in God must be the way to avoid the judgement, to be part of the coming kingdom of our father David (11:10).

Left to ourselves it is impossible to enter the kingdom (10:23) but with faith in God it is possible for the impossible to happen - mountains can be thrown into the sea (v.23). Hence, faith in God will result in God delivering you if you ask him to (v.23).

Jesus continues with the subject of prayer in v.24. We've heard him teach about prayer before in Mark 9:14-29. There it reflected a total dependence on Jesus which was exemplified by the man in v.23-24. Notice there too Jesus said, "All things are possible for one who believes" (9:23). Again, this incident was read as exemplifying spiritual deliverance (9:26) from the terrible state human beings find themselves in. So, the prayer Jesus refers to in 11:24 is prayer faithful prayer for deliverance.

This faithful prayer for deliverance will mean that we admit we are sinners in need of forgiveness and forgive others (cf. 9:50b).

THINKING IT THROUGH

- What does this teach us about Jesus? How does it challenge our views of him?
- What does it teach us about all he has done for us and how we should respond to him?

MARK 11:27-12:17

AIM

- To see the seriousness of old Israel's rejection of Jesus.
- To give thanks that God in his grace gives the vineyard to others who are to give to him what belongs to him.

CONTEXT

The ministry of Jesus is moving towards its climax. He has predicted that he will die and rise again in Jerusalem (10:33-34) and now he enters the city (11:11). Jesus enters the Jerusalem deliberately stressing his sovereignty over the events which are about to unfold (11:2-3) but also self consciously as the messianic king coming to bring peace because of the blood of his covenant (11:4-10 cf. Zech 9:9-13).

The crowd recognises his claim to kingship and his claim to bring about the final kingdom (11:9-10). However, given the way they turn on Jesus later in the gospel (15:6-15), we must assume that they welcome Jesus as a political liberator rather than as a saviour who will die for their sins.

Mark now throws the spotlight onto the temple. The ministry of Jesus will centre in and around the temple up until 13:36. The temple is the focus of Israel's national life. It is the symbol of God's presence among them. Yet the cursing of the fig tree (11:12-14) for lack of fruit, followed by the cleansing of the temple, indicates that God is judging Israel for her fruitlessness. The quotation Jesus makes from Jeremiah 7 in 11:17 confirms that understanding. Israel has been using the temple as a superstitious talisman while it worships other gods. God's judgement is about to fall on her for her continued fruitlessness.

The next section focuses in on the theme of Israel's rejection of God epitomised by her spiritual leaders and their attitude to Jesus.

STRUCTURE

11:27-33	The authority of Jesus to judge is challenged
12:1-12	The authority of Jesus to judge is established
12:13-17	The authority of God is unquestionable

1. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS TO JUDGE IS CHALLENGED (11:27-33)

Jesus has just exercised immense authority. Who has the right to cleanse and judge the temple? The chief priests and the scribes are furious and hence look for a way to destroy him (11:18). This desire to destroy Jesus now emerges in a number of encounters. 11:27-33 and 12:13-17 represent assaults on Jesus by the religious leaders of Israel. In 12:1-11 Jesus interprets these assaults and establishes his authority.

The religious leaders confront Jesus in the temple in v.27-28. Their question in v.28 is designed to trap him. If he answers that his authority comes from God then they will accuse him of blasphemy and claim the right to kill him. If he answers from man then again that is no authority at all and he is worthy of judgement for such audacious behaviour.

Therefore, rather than walk into their trap, Jesus poses a brilliant counter question in v.30. Verses 31-32 reveal the horns of the dilemma onto which Jesus has cast the religious leaders. However, it is not just clever verbal sparring. Jesus is wanting to expose the religious leaders apostasy. They refuse to acknowledge John's authority and hence they refuse to acknowledge his authority. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:4). Therefore, not to acknowledge it is to implicitly refuse to repent and to refuse to go the way of forgiveness (cf. 11:25). They do not have faith and will not be saved from the coming judgement (11:22-25).

2. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS TO JUDGE IS ESTABLISHED (12:1-12)

The opening verse of chapter 12 is crucial. Jesus has taught his disciples that parables have a specific function in his teaching. In 4:11-12 he indicates that he tells parables to those outside of the kingdom as an act of judgement. Parables are designed to blind further the spiritually blind and to deafen further the spiritually deaf. This judicial blinding of the hardened sinner prevents them turning to be forgiven (4:12b cf. 11:25).

Mark has not told us of any parables since chapter 4 (unless one counts 7:27ff but this is not explicitly called a parable and it leads to understanding not hardening). Therefore, the return to the telling of a parable, indeed such a long parable, is highly significant. Jesus is pronouncing serious judgement on the religious leaders of Israel.

The details of the parable become clear when read against the background of Isaiah 5:1-7 which describes Israel as an out of control vineyard. The servants the owner sends to gather fruit from the tenants are his prophets (v.25). This understanding is confirmed by Jeremiah 7:24-26 (the chapter Jesus quotes in Mark 11:17) which speaks of Israel's rejection of God's servants the prophets. The beloved son of v.6 must refer to Jesus - he is the owner's final opportunity for the tenants to repent. They refuse to accept the son and kill him (Jesus has been predicting this will happen cf. 10:33). Hence, v.9 is a sober verse of judgement and grace - judgement since God's patience with the original tenants has now run out but grace since he gives the vineyard to others.

Jesus ends the parable by quoting Psalm 118, a psalm which speaks of victory over enemies. The religious leaders of Israel might have rejected Jesus but in God's providence he is to become the cornerstone. This might be temple imagery where Jesus is indicating that even though the old temple is under judgement, he is the new temple. He has answered the religious leaders' question of 11:28 - as the beloved son and as the cornerstone, he has total authority to judge unrepentant Israel.

The truth of the parable and the evidence that parables are used to further blind the blind is found in v.13. The religious leaders know the parable has been told against them but far from repenting they are still looking for a way to arrest Jesus. Their actions confirm the words of Jesus against them.

3. THE AUTHORITY OF GOD IS UNQUESTIONABLE (12:13-17)

The Pharisees and Herodians are now sent to trap Jesus (v.13). Their weasel words in v.14a are confirmed as lacking in sincerity by Jesus in v.15a - they are hypocrites.

Once more their question in v.14b is designed to force Jesus onto the horns of a dilemma. If he says it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar then the people will accuse him of being of a collaborator and will lose faith in him as a liberator. If he says it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar then the Romans will arrest him as a subversive.

Once more Jesus gives a brilliant but penetrating answer. The image of Caesar on the coin is incontrovertible hence it's not inflammatory to any side to say, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's". But, the second half of the statement Jesus makes is where the rubber bites the road. What does he mean when he tells them to render "to God the things which are God's"?

In the wider context Jesus must mean the fruit which is lacking on the fruit tree, the worship which is lacking in the temple and the acknowledgement of the Son in the parable. Jeremiah 7 is again instructive - God is interested in covenantal obedience (Jer 7:23) which issues in justice (Jer 7:5-6). This is not 'works religion' - the covenant is based on grace and calls for a life of grateful worship. This is what Israel's leaders denied in their rejection of Jesus. The call to render to God the things which are God's is a call for worshipful obedience which recognises the Son.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How does the passage challenge our view of Jesus?
- What does it say to us who are not Jewish leaders?
 - Is the point for us that we should respond in gratitude that the vineyard has been given to others (12:9 cf. Romans 11)?
 - Does it warn us to fear the judgement of God (cf. Romans 9:20-22)?
 - Does it warn us to render to God the things which are God's?

MARK 12:18-44

AIM

- To see that false religion does not understand the Scriptures and will be judged.
- To see that true religion will be rewarded.

CONTEXT

Jesus has entered Jerusalem (11:11) where he has predicted he will suffer at the hands of the chief priests and scribes, be killed and be raised again (10:33-34). The focus of his ministry in Jerusalem is the Temple (11:11, 15, 27, 12:35-41, 13:1), the centre of Jewish hopes and confidence. Jesus prophesies judgment on old Israel (11:12-25, 12:1-11) since they do not produce the fruit of righteousness for which God is looking. They follow the letter of the law but their hearts are far from him.

The leaders of old Israel confirm the judgment of Jesus as they continue to assail him with hostile questions (11:27ff, 12:13ff). This pattern is carried on in 12:18-44 where the leaders of old Israel continue to try and trap Jesus (12:18). Jesus continues to issue warnings of judgment against them (12:38ff). However, there is also hope for some of old Israel if they see to the heart of the Law [12:28ff). The heart of the passage seems to revolve around the correct interpretation of the OT (v.24, 28, 35).

STRUCTURE

18-27	The Sadducees are wrong!
28-34	A Scribe is right!
35-40	The Scribes are wrong!
41-44	The widow is right!

1. THE SADDUCEES ARE WRONG! (v.18-27)

The Sadducees try to deny the reality of the final resurrection (v.18). The resurrection in Jewish theology was to be the time of final judgment, hence the Sadducees implicitly deny judgment too. This has been a major concern of Jesus during his time so far in Jerusalem. Hence the denial is an important one at this point. They try and demonstrate the absurdity of the resurrection by framing a question to do with the OT provision for levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10). If the letter of the law is followed at the resurrection then there will be big confusion (v.23)! Hence the Sadducees are trying to get Jesus to deny the Law or to deny the resurrection. Either way he's in trouble with the crowd.

Jesus is quite adamant that the Sadducees are wrong (v.24, 27b). The reason for their folly is that they know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (v.24). This is one reason rather than two - to truly know the Scriptures is to know the power of God to raise the dead. Jesus addresses the horns of the dilemma with which the Sadducees have presented him.

i. v. 25 The Law will not be broken at the resurrection since there will be no marriage. There will be no need to continue the family name (which was the purpose of levirate marriage).

ii. v. 26 The Scriptures demonstrate that there will be a resurrection. When God speaks to Moses from the bush in Exodus 3, he speaks of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the present tense. They are still alive in God's economy and will receive in time the fulfilment of the promises God makes to Moses. The only way to understand this is on the basis of future resurrection.

The Sadducees appear to exemplify old Israel's inability to understand the Scriptures properly, to listen and to hear (cf 4:10ff).

2. A SCRIBE IS RIGHT! (v.28-34)

But, all is not lost for old Israel. Mark now introduces a Scribe who asks Jesus a question (v.28). There seems to be a deliberate echo of 10:17 where another man asks Jesus a question. Jesus answers the man's question about the most important commandment by quoting Deut 6:4 and Lev 19:18. These two commandments sit at the heart of the OT law (v.31b).

The Scribe affirms the answer Jesus gives him but includes a significant addition in v. 33b – 'to love God and your neighbour...is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices'. He sees what old Israel fails to see - the temple rituals are empty if not accompanied by heart felt love for God and neighbour (cf 11:17 and Jeremiah 7). He truly know the Scriptures.

Jesus affirms his response in v.34 and tells him that he is not far from the kingdom. This is slightly enigmatic but presumably Jesus means that to see that religion is primarily a matter of the heart which works itself out in action is the beginning of recognising the need for forgiveness and a changed heart (7:14-23).

3. THE SCRIBES ARE WRONG! (v.35-40)

Jesus goes on to raise a question of his own. Notice he asks, 'How can the Scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?'. Given the encounter that has just happened in v.18-27 and the warning which is about to be given in v.38-40, this must be significant. It appears to be another example of how the Scribes were ignorant of the Scriptures.

Jesus' question seems to suggest that the Scribes were teaching that the Christ would be subject to David. He would be great but not as great as David. Jesus draws their attention to David's Spirit-inspired declaration that the Messiah would be his Lord (Ps 110:1). If David called the coming Messiah his Lord then he must be greater than David. The Scribes do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. Jesus has authority to interpret the Scriptures as David's Lord.

Jesus goes on to warn about the religion of the Scribes in 38-40. It is external (v.38-40) and immoral (v.40a). Once more it bears the hallmarks of fruitlessness which Jesus has warned about in chapter 11 (cf Jer 7). We assume that the Scribes will receive 'greater condemnation' (v.40b) since they should have known the Scriptures and lived otherwise. Their life and job centred on the OT yet they completely fail to see its heart. This leads them to live outside of God's will, confident in their own righteousness.

4. THE WIDOW IS RIGHT! (v.41-44)

The section ends with Jesus observing a widow. She gives a tiny amount (v.42) in contrast to the large sums given by the rich (v.41). But, Jesus commends her over and above the wealthy. They give a proportion of their abundance but she gives everything she has (v.44). She has grasped the OT principle of wholehearted love for God. She exemplifies the teaching of Jesus in 8:34-37. True religion gives all to God. The Scribes give nothing.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How far does our understanding of Scripture penetrate our lives?
- In what ways are we tempted to value cerebral understanding of the Bible which misses the point the Bible and of true religion?

MARK 13:1-37

AIM

- To see that the destruction of the temple was certain.
- To be alert since the destruction of the temple looks forward to the final judgement of the world.

CONTEXT

Jesus continues to teach in Jerusalem with his activity centred on the temple. He has exposed the sin of old Israel which fails to understand the Scriptures or the power of God (12:18-44). He has prophesied that the leaders of old Israel will be judged one and for all (12:1-12).

He now turns his attention to the fabric of the temple itself and prophesies its destruction (13:2). The destruction of the temple will point us forward to the judgement of the whole world.

STRUCTURE

- 1-2 The temple will be destroyed
- 3-13 How to act before the temple is judged
- 14-23 How to act when the temple is destroyed
- 24-27 What will happen after the temple is destroyed
- 28-31 The temple's judgement signs the world's judgement
- 32-37 How to act while you wait for judgement

1. THE TEMPLE WILL BE DESTROYED (13:1-2)

The comment by the unnamed disciple about the beauty of the physical fabric of the temple prompts the prophecy by Jesus that the physical temple will be destroyed. Therefore, this seems to be the controlling idea of chapter 13. All else in the chapter springs from it.

2. HOW TO ACT BEFORE THE TEMPLE IS DESTROYED (13:3-13)

Peter, James, John and Andrew now have a private audience with Jesus. They want to know how they will be able to tell when the temple is about to be destroyed (v.4).

Jesus gives them two warnings:

i. See that no-one leads you astray v.5-8. The days before the destruction of the temple will be characterised by false messiahs (v.6), wars (v.7-8a) and natural disasters (v.8b). These are only the beginning of birth pains to the main event of judgment on Israel in the destruction of the temple. The disciples are to keep their nerve.

ii. Be on your guard v.9-13. Jesus paints a graphic picture of persecution from the religious authorities (v.9a), the religious authorities (v.9b) and even within families (v.12). Jesus encourages them not to be anxious since the Spirit will give them words to speak when on trial (v.11) and also to endure to the end for his sake in order to be saved. The events immediately before the destruction of the temple will tempt them to give up under the weight of persecution so be on guard.

V. 10 might suggest a timescale which reaches beyond the destruction of the temple. But, if we assume that the events recorded in Acts (which Luke sees as the completion of the circle for preaching the gospel to the nations by the apostles) happened pre- destruction then these words hold true.

3. HOW TO ACT WHEN THE TEMPLE IS DESTROYED (13:14-23)

The phrase "abomination of desolation" is taken from Daniel 9:27, 11:31 where it refers to the desecration of the temple. On August 30 in AD70 the Romans captured and burnt the Temple. The Roman general Titus entered the Holy of Holies thus desecrating it since only the High Priest was meant to enter this area.

This will be a time of great tribulation and dispersal (15-19) but God will not allow it to be an ultimate destruction of his elect people in Israel (v.20). Nonetheless, the disciples are to continue to be on guard because the days surrounding the destruction of the temple will be full of false prophets and messiahs (v.21-23).

4. WHAT WILL HAPPEN AFTER THE TEMPLE IS DESTROYED (13:24-27)

This passage moves us beyond the destruction of the temple. The events occur after the destruction of the temple (v.24). The language appears to be end time apocalyptic referring to the final day of the Lord and the visible return of Jesus (cf. Mark 8:38). It seems to point to the final day when Christ shall return on the clouds (cf. Acts 1:11). The language and imagery are echoed in Revelation 7 where the final people of God are gathered around the throne of God.

The disciples should not lose heart. The destruction of the temple will not thwart God's purpose to save his elect from all over the world.

5. THE TEMPLE'S JUDGMENT SIGNS THE WORLD'S JUDGMENT (13:28-31)

Jesus now seems to draw the relationship between the judgement of the temple and the final judgement together. The budding of the fig tree is a sign that summer is near (v.28) so when these things take place (i.e. the destruction of the temple) you know that he is near (i.e. the coming of the Son of Man). The destruction of the temple is a sign of final judgement. Hence, the 'these things' of v.30 refers back to the 'these things' of v.29 - the generation Jesus speaks to will not pass away until the temple has been destroyed. His prophecy is certain (v.31).

6. HOW TO ACT WHILE YOU WAIT FOR JUDGMENT (13:32-37)

Jesus says that even though these events are certain their timing is uncertain to all except the Father (v.32). The characteristic stance of the Christian is to stay awake (v.33, v.34, v.37). The temptation will be to go to sleep while we wait for Jesus, to be caught unaware and faithless. We know that the destruction of the temple happened so how much more should we be awake to the final return and judgement of Jesus.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- In what ways are we tempted to 'go to sleep' as we wait for final judgement?
- How does this passage encourage us to stay awake?

MARK 14:1-26

AIM

- To see that Jesus sovereignly gives himself up to death in order to fulfil the covenant of grace.
- To see that human beings were responsible for his death too.

CONTEXT

We now enter the final part of Mark's gospel. Jesus has foretold his death on three occasions (8:31, 9:31, 10:33) and demonstrated that he is totally aware of the events which are about to unfold. He is not caught out and knows that his kingship will be established through his death and resurrection.

Mark has also told us that human beings are plotting to kill Jesus (3:6, 11:18, 12:12). They do so because they refuse to listen to the words of Jesus and have evil hearts (7:14-23). Jesus has prepared his disciples for the judgement which is to come (12:1-11, 13). He has told them to stay awake since judgement might come at any time (13:33, 34, 37).

These final chapters show us Jesus freely going up to death. They interpret the meaning of his death for us. Alongside this narrative is the story of his betrayal by Judas, the denial of the other 11 particularly Peter and the plotting of the authorities to kill Jesus. In many ways v. 21 is a key verse holding together the divine intention ("For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him...") and human responsibility ("... but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!").

STRUCTURE

- 1-11 An anointing to remember
- 12-26 A meal to remember

1. AN ANOINTING TO REMEMBER (14:1-11)

There appears to be a 'Markan sandwich' at work here with 1-2 and 10-11 forming the outer sections. We might even speak about 'multi-layering' since the themes introduced here (betrayal, denial and divine plan) continue to recur over the next few chapters.

Mark begins to signal the theological significance of the death of Jesus in v.1 which will reach a climax in the words of Jesus in v.22-25 (see notes there for more). The Passover and the feast of unleavened bread which immediately followed it were given by God to his people to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12:1-28). In the original event of the Exodus, a lamb was to be killed and its blood spread on the doorposts of the Israelite's homes. This would guarantee that the angel of the Lord, passing through Egypt to kill the firstborn, would pass over the Israelite houses. The feast of the Passover always involved the killing and eating of lamb in order to remember this event. Mark is preparing us to see Jesus as the final Passover lamb - the chief priests and scribes are looking for a way to kill him (v.1a) even though they wish to avoid the feast. However, Jesus will be killed during the feast in order to fulfil the promise of the Passover.

Judas colludes in the plot of the chief priests and scribes (v.10-11). Mark doesn't give us any motive apart from possible money. The hatred of the chief priests and scribes and the greed of Judas is in stark contrast to the incident sandwiched in between them in v.3-9.

There are three factors at work here:

i. v.3 The woman's costly action of breaking the flask of nard over the head of Jesus. We are not sure whether the woman understood the full implications of her actions (see on v.8 below) but it is obviously an act of loving devotion to Jesus. He describes it as a 'beautiful thing' in v.7. Her lavish act of devotion is contrasted by Mark with the greed of Judas in v.10-11.

ii. v.4-5 The indignant response of some of those present. We are not told precisely who these people are but I think it's legitimate to assume that the disciples were among them. Again they demonstrate a failure to

understand all that Jesus is about to do on their behalf and the proper response to it. The care of the poor is less important than honouring Jesus at this point.

iii. v.6-9 The interpretation of the woman's action given by Jesus. Jesus rebukes them. He does not rebuke them for wanting to care for the poor - in fact he tells them that there will be plenty of opportunity to carry on doing this. It's a basic responsibility of his followers. Rather he rebukes them for getting their timing wrong. He is about to leave them (as he has persistently told them) and they still do not see the need to honour him. Their priority at this time should be to revere him but they fail to see it. In contrast the woman has acted with total devotion to Jesus. She has acted prophetically as she anoints his body for burial. Even as we read verse 9 the words of Jesus are fulfilled - we remember her action and its significance. Jesus also makes an extraordinary prediction here - his death will be gospel, good news, preached in all the world.

2. A MEAL TO REMEMBER (14:12-26)

Again Mark lets us know the significance of the coming death of Jesus - it's the day when they sacrificed the Passover lamb (v.12). Jesus demonstrates his total control over the situation in v.13-16 as he commands the disciples to follow a detailed set of instructions. He has foreknowledge of the events which are about to unfold.

Jesus and his disciples begin to eat together in v.17-21. Jesus predicts that he will be betrayed by one of them and once more demonstrates his foreknowledge. Mark wants us to know that all of them imagined it might be them (v.19). So, while Jesus makes clear that the action Judas is about to take is terrible (v.21b), there is a sense in which it could have been any of the disciples. Subsequent events in chapter 14 and 15 show Judas to be a betrayer but the disciples to be deniers. There is a difference (betrayers actively plot to get rid of Jesus whereas deniers passively abandon him). So, there is ambiguity in the portrayal of the disciples at this point.

In v. 22-25 Jesus shows the disciples that his death will be the fulfilment of the Passover meals. Through the death of Jesus God will finally pass over his people when judgement comes (cf. ch.13). The interpretative words Jesus inserts into the Passover liturgy (v.22b and v.24-25) would have been shocking to his original hearers. They expect silence at these points yet he says in effect, "This is all about me".

It's hard to overestimate the significance of the words of v.24. God established a covenant of grace with Abraham which was ratified through bloody death (Genesis 15:10). This principle of ratification through bloody death continues in every subsequent administration of this covenant (e.g. the Mosaic administration of the covenant is confirmed by blood in Exodus 24:3-8). The prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34) looked forward to a day when this covenant would be final (it's 'new' in the sense that the Law will now be written on their hearts rather than on tablets of stone - it is not 'new' in the sense of being a totally different covenant. The basic covenant promise that God will be their God and they will be his people is the same as the one made to Abraham in Gen 17:7-8). The day of the new covenant will be a day of forgiveness (Jer 31:34).

So, Jesus is saying his death will be the ratification of the final administration of the covenant God made with Abraham. All that this covenant looked forward to, all that the subsequent administrations of the covenant anticipated, is now about to come to pass in his death. His blood will be poured out for many. Jesus emphasises the once and for all nature of his death by his assertion that he will not drink again until the final kingdom (v.25).

Therefore, in inviting his disciples to eat and drink, Jesus is inviting them to appropriate his death for themselves. He gives himself for them and to them and invites them to share in the benefits of his death.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- Have I entered into the covenant of grace by faith in the death of Jesus for me?
- In what ways can we keep the death of Jesus before us?
- How can I respond in lavish devotion to Jesus because of his death for me?
- How do we hold the tension between the sovereignty of God in the death of Jesus and the responsibility of wicked men for killing him? What happens if we fail to hold the tension in either direction?

MARK 14:27-52

AIM

- To see the sovereignty of God in the death of Jesus.
- To see the weakness of the human heart.

CONTEXT

Mark continues the inexorable movement towards the death of Jesus. Jesus in the early part of chapter 14 has demonstrated his control over and knowledge of the events which are about to unfold (v.8-9, 12-16, 18). He is not to be caught off guard. He goes willingly to his death. Chapter 14 has also continued to give us insight into the meaning of the death of Jesus - he dies as **the** Passover lamb (v.1, 12); his blood is shed as ratification of the new covenant (v.24); his blood is poured out for many (v.24). The appropriate response to his death is to be lavish (v.6) and is to appropriate all that he is about to do for oneself (v.22-23).

Mark has also stressed the culpability of Judas (v.10-11, 21) and the chief priests and scribes for the death of Jesus. Judas wilfully seeks to betray Jesus (v.10-11) and the religious rulers wilfully seek to arrest Jesus and kill him (v.1).

The trajectory Mark has set in the early part of chapter 14 now continues in the next section. A key verse is probably v.27 - as the story unfolds we see God about to strike the shepherd (albeit though the actions of evil men) and the sheep being scattered.

STRUCTURE

26-31 The shepherd will be struck and the sheep will be scattered

32-42 The shepherd prays and the sheep sleep

43-52 The shepherd begins to be struck and the sheep begin to scatter

1. THE SHEPHERD WILL BE STRUCK AND THE SHEEP WILL BE SCATTERED (14:26-31)

Jesus makes a chilling prediction in v.27 - "you will all fall away". He then goes on to quote from the prophet Zechariah in the rest of v. 27. The context of this verse in Zechariah's prophecy is that the scattering is part of a refining process of God's people. The remnant will be tested and refined (Zech 13:9a). The end of the process will be the reaffirmation of God's covenant promise to his people (Zech 13:9b cf. Mark 14:24).

Once more the striking is God's work. Jesus emphasises this note of divine sovereignty as he reassures the disciples that he will be raised and will go ahead of them into Galilee (v.28).

But, equally v. 29-31 tell us the scattering will be God's work too. Peter characteristically insists that he will not deny Jesus. Nonetheless Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him three times before the night is out. This prediction is fulfilled by 14:72. Jesus is making clear the weakness of the human heart and the deep need we have for him to die for us.

2. THE SHEPHERD PRAYS AND THE SHEEP SLEEP (14:32-42)

Jesus now goes to pray in v.32. There are only three occasions in the Gospel where he withdraws to pray and each one marks a point of decision (cf. 1:35ff, 6:46). Will he go God's way or choose another path?

The narrative focuses on the very real suffering of Jesus in the garden - Jesus is, 'greatly distressed and troubled', his soul, 'is very sorrowful, even unto death'. The reason for this agony is not just the fact that Jesus knows he is soon to be killed. Rather the key is found in v.36 where he prays for the cup to be taken from him. We saw at 10:39 that the cup Jesus speaks of is the cup of God's wrath (cf. Jeremiah 25:15-29, 49:12, Isaiah 51:17-23) which he will drink at the cross in order that God's people need not drink it. This will be a terrible thing and Jesus, as someone who is fully human, recoils at the thought. But, he is totally committed to doing the Father's purpose hence he prays in v.36b, "Yet not what I will, but what you will."

The other major dynamic at work in this part of the narrative is the response (or lack of response) of the disciples.

Jesus once more takes Peter, James and John with him (cf. 9:2) we assume as key representatives of the disciples and future key leaders of the church. He invites them to remain and to watch (v.34). Immediately we are reminded of his commands to them throughout chapter 13 (v.9, 23, 33-37) where he encourages them to stay on guard and to stay awake as future judgement begins to break on them. Jesus is about to struggle with the oncoming judgement of God and once more encourages them to stay awake while he prays. But they fall asleep not once but three times (v.37, 40, 41). Peter's three fold denial Jesus has predicted in v.30 is mirrored in this threefold sleep. The disciples fail to be on guard and so are unprepared for the events of judgement which are about to unfold. They will be scattered.

Their slumbers are shattered in v. 41-42. The betrayal Jesus has foretold in v.21 is about to happen and Jesus knows it. All that he has predicted and prepared the disciples for is now to take place - 'the hour has come'.

3. THE SHEPHERD BEGINS TO BE STRUCK AND THE SHEEP BEGIN TO SCATTER (14:43-52)

The narrative picks up pace in v. 43 – "immediately, while he was still speaking..." Now, all those responsible for the death of Jesus so far are in one place at one time - Judas, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. All of old Israel is implicated and there is a hint that new Israel is too. Mark notes that Judas is 'one of the twelve' partly to let us know that the prediction of Jesus in v.18 is coming to pass, partly to point the finger at the twelve - It's Judas who betrays Jesus but they've been sleeping.

Jesus rebukes the arrest mob for with words of irony in v.48-49. They come heavily armed at night as if he was a robber. Why didn't they do their work in the daytime as he taught in the temple? The answer must be that they could not do what they did without the permission of God. This happens now in order that 'the Scriptures be fulfilled'. This probably refers back to the prophecy of Zechariah 13. The betrayal and arrest of the shepherd marks the beginning of the divine strike.

This understanding is confirmed by v.50-52. The striking of the shepherd is accompanied by the scattering of the sheep. Mark simply states that they all left him and fled. None of the twelve sticks with Jesus. Their sleepiness in the garden results in the ultimate denial of Jesus. Verse 51 is particularly full of irony. The young man follows Jesus (cf. 10:34) but the persecution of men is more than he can bear. Rather than be associated with a soon to be crucified man he would rather bear the shame of nakedness.

The section presses how much the human heart needs to be changed though the death of Jesus.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- Thank God that Jesus Christ was willing to drink the cup on our behalf.
- How are we tempted to deny him now? How does this passage motivate us not to do it?

MARK 14:53-15:15

AIM

- To see that Jesus is crucified on his terms even though he is innocent.
- To see the universal guilt of humanity.

CONTEXT

Mark has begun to describe the events leading up to the death of Jesus. He has stressed the sovereignty of God in striking the shepherd (Jesus) (14:27) but has also shown us how the sheep (the disciples) will be scattered. This is seen up to this point in the sleepiness of the disciples in the garden (32-42) and the total abandonment of Jesus after his arrest (v.50).

Once more the purpose of the death of Jesus has been emphasised in the reference to the wrath bearing cup (v.36). Mark indicates the full horror of this impending experience in the psychological description of Jesus in 14:33-34. The humanity of Jesus is very evident but his total submission in his humanity to the will of the Father is equally clear (v.36b).

Mark has also set in place the subplot of the denial of Jesus by Peter. In the face of Peter's protestations Jesus has predicted that he will deny him three times before the cock crows. This subplot comes to a climax in our current passage. Peter, the most insightful of the disciples in many ways (cf. 8:29) is seen as a failure. By 15:16 Jesus has been abandoned by everyone who once supported him. Once again Mark is pushing us to see why Jesus must die.

STRUCTURE

53-65	Old Israel condemns Jesus
66-72	New Israel denies Jesus
15:1-15	The Gentiles condemn Jesus

1. OLD ISRAEL CONDEMNS JESUS (14:53-65)

Mark now describes the fulfilment of the prophecies Jesus has made earlier in the Gospel. Jesus is handed over to the chief priest, the elders and the scribes (cf. 8:31, 10:33). Peter is present albeit at a distance (v.54).

Mark stresses the innocence of Jesus as three times he draws our attention to the lack of evidence and false witnesses who are brought in to testify against Jesus (v.55, 56, 57-59). He gives us an example of the lies they tell in v.58 where they distort the truth of the teaching of Jesus.

[Mark weaves patterns of three throughout the section (and indeed throughout the gospel - 3 denials, 3 rejections (religious leaders, Gentile rulers, the crowd))]

The men who are responsible for the death of Jesus are not mistaken in their opposition. They are deliberately setting out to kill an innocent man.

Jesus remarkably does not answer their lies (v.60-61). He is about to choose the grounds on which he will be tried in order to make the point about his identity and work. Also, his silence takes us back to the suffering servant prophecies of Isaiah 53:7 - this is God's sacrificial lamb, silent in the face of his imminent slaughter at the hands of his oppressors. There is an irony here since the high priest is the one commissioned to kill the lamb of atonement each year. Here he is responsible for the death of the final lamb of atonement.

Jesus finally speaks to the question of the high priest in v.61. Mark began his narrative by telling us that it was the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1). Now the high priest asks Jesus to confirm his identity in these exact terms. Jesus answers affirmatively in v.62 but goes on to add that he is the Son of Man who will come in the clouds of heaven. He is the divine figure of Daniel 7 who will one day judge those who now presume to judge him (cf. Mark 8:39). Jesus chooses the grounds on which he will be condemned.

The chief priest's response in v.63-64 reveals the importance of the words of Jesus. If they are not true then they are blasphemous. If they are true then the guilt of the high priest is exposed. The grounds on which Jesus is to be killed are true. Notice Mark emphasises the corporate responsibility of the religious leaders of old Israel in v.64 - 'they all condemned him as deserving death'.

Once more v.65 fulfils the prediction of Jesus back in 8:31, 10:34 - Jesus is mocked and spat at. The irony of the call to prophesy is that Jesus **has** prophesied these events and has just prophesied his identity in v.62. No-one is listening (cf. Mark 4:10ff).

2. NEW ISRAEL DENIES JESUS (14:66-72)

Verses 66-72 represent high tragedy. From the moment Peter uttered his affirmation that he would not deny Jesus there has been a relentless movement to his point.

Peter is pursued by the servant girl and in the face of her accusations denies Jesus twice. The accusation of the bystanders in v.70 draws an even more heated response from Peter in v.71 - he invokes a curse on himself and swears as he denies Jesus for the third time and the cock crows for the second time. Again, there is irony here - Jesus is about to die for someone who would rather be cursed than to take up his cross and follow him. The threefold sleepiness of the disciples is now mirrored by the threefold denial of Peter. Even new Israel deny Jesus at the point of his death.

But, there is hope. Peter demonstrates tearful remorse in v. 72b. Jesus has told the about-to-be-scattered disciples in 14:28 that he will go ahead of them to Galilee after the resurrection. They will be reunited after Jesus has died for them.

3. THE GENTILES CONDEMN JESUS (v.15:1-15)

The Jewish religious leaders now hand Jesus over to the Gentile leaders. Once more the words of Jesus are being fulfilled (cf. Mark 10:33).

Jesus remains silent before Pilate paralleling his silence before the high priest (v.4-5 cf. 14:61). But, once more when Jesus speaks it is to affirm his identity - he is indeed King of the Jews. The major theme of the opening chapters of the gospel is again foregrounded by Jesus. He will die for the truth.

The Barabbas sequence in v.6-15 reveals a number of key ideas. Mark introduces another 'three' pattern - Pilate asks the crowd three questions (v.9, v.12 and v.14). The innocence of Jesus is established - Pilate knows the chief priests want Jesus dead out of envy (v.10) and that Jesus has done no evil (v.14). Pilate is portrayed as culpable for the death of Jesus - he knows he is innocent of any genuine crime (v.14) and yet hands Jesus over to be crucified in order to satisfy the crowd. Moreover, the crowd who had acclaimed Jesus as their king only a few days before (11:8-10), now want him dead. Old Israel join with the Gentile ruler in condemning Jesus.

Finally, Mark again points to a key feature of the meaning of the cross. The innocent Jesus dies in order that the guilty criminal Barabbas can go free. Mark has told us that Jesus will die as a ransom for many (10:45) and this is now graphically illustrated in the freeing of Barabbas just before the cross itself.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How does this passage change our view of Jesus? Of ourselves?
- How do we try and avoid our guilt for the death of Jesus?
- Thank God that Jesus was prepared to die as an innocent man for guilty people.

MARK 15:16-16:8

AIM

- To see the significance of the death of Jesus and how we should respond to it.

CONTEXT

Mark is about to bring his Gospel to a climax and a conclusion. The teaching of Jesus about his person and work in chapters 1-14 is about to be made concrete in the events surrounding his death.

Chapter 14 and the early part of chapter 15 have graphically described the sovereignty of God in the death of Jesus. Jesus goes willingly to his death and chooses the grounds on which he will be tried - he is the Christ, the Son of the Blessed and the Son of Man (14:61-62); he is the King of the Jews (15:2). He is the suffering servant and sacrificial lamb who remains silent in the face of his accusers (14:61, 15:5 cf. Is 53:7). Jesus dies instead of a condemned criminal (15:6ff). Jesus is the Son of Man who will one day return to judge his accusers (14:62).

But, Mark has also graphically drawn a picture of the weakness of the human heart. The disciples go to sleep on Jesus three times (14:32-42), Peter denies Jesus three times (14:66-72) and the Jewish leaders, a Gentile ruler (Pilate) and the Jewish crowd all condemn Jesus (14:53-11:15). Mark is constantly emphasising the innocence of Jesus - three times he tells us that Jesus is confronted with false charges and false witnesses (14:55-59). The whole of humanity is culpable for the death of Jesus.

STRUCTURE

16-41	The killing of the king
42-47	The burial of the king
16:1-8	The resurrection of the king

1. THE KILLING OF THE KING (15:16-41)

This section represents the fulfilment of OT Scripture (e.g. Is 53 and Ps 22) but also the fulfilment of the prophecies of Jesus (Mark 8:31, 9:31 and 10:33). This once more serves to highlight the purpose and sovereignty of God in the death of Jesus.

A number of themes are woven together:

i. Jesus is the King of the Jews

Mark relies on irony to make this point very clear. The soldiers in v. 16-20 mock Jesus as the king of the Jews, dressing him with a fake crown, kingly purple cloak and paying him false homage. The authorities place an inscription describing him as King of the Jews above the cross and the chief priests mock him as the King of Israel. They want him to save himself by coming off the cross so that they, "may see and believe".

The centurion, in contrast to the chief priests, 'sees' the way Jesus dies and acknowledges the dead Jesus as the Son of God (a kingly title in Mark's gospel). Jesus is king but his throne is a cross and he exercises his saving rule through his death.

ii. Jesus bears the judgement of God instead of sinners.

The people who surround the cross despise and misunderstand Jesus. Passers by deride him (v.29), chief priests and scribes mock him (v.31), those crucified with him revile him (v.32) and other bystanders think he's calling Elijah (v.35). Jesus is universally rejected at the cross.

This rejection carries through into the rejection of the Son by the Father. The onlookers deserve judgement for their rejection of the Son but it is Jesus who bears the judgement of the Father. The darkness in daytime is an OT sign of judgement (cf. Ex 10:21, Amos 8:9ff). Jesus quotes Psalm 22 in a cry of dereliction (v.34). The Son drinks the cup of the Father's wrath against sinful humanity (cf. 10:38, 14:36 - there might be a note of irony in 15:36 where the crowd offer Jesus something to drink at the point where he is drinking the cup of wrath).

iii. Jesus death is effective

At the point where Jesus appears to be defeated, Mark lets us know that he has achieved all that he set out to do. V.37 - the Greek word for 'breathed his last' implies a deliberate death. Jesus chooses when he will die (presumably when the 'cup' is empty). It is this which convinces the centurion of his identity (v.39).

Moreover, the curtain of the temple which kept sinners out of the Holy of Holies, is torn in two. The way to God is now opened through the death of Jesus. To make the point Mark has a Gentile centurion, charged with killing Jesus, see and believe (v.39).

There is a note of hope too in v. 40-41. Even though the disciples have been scattered, a hard core remain near Jesus. The words of v.41 emphasises that they have followed Jesus even up to Jerusalem (cf. 8:34) and have not totally abandoned him

2. THE BURIAL OF THE KING (15:42-47)

This section serves a number of purposes too. If the centurion represented a Gentile responding rightly to the death of Jesus then Joseph represents a Jew responding rightly - he is looking for the kingdom of God (v.43) and we assume, since he went to ask for the body of Jesus, he thought it must come in some way through Jesus even though he was dead.

Mark also has an apologetic agenda. Scepticism about resurrection is not confined to our age so Mark marshals evidence that Jesus really was dead:

- Pilate is surprised that Jesus is already dead (v.44)
- The professional soldier confirms it (v.45)
- Joseph securely seals the tomb (v.46)
- The two Mary's knew exactly where he was laid - there is no room for getting the wrong tomb the next day.

3. THE RESURRECTION OF THE KING (v.16:1-8)

Mark bookends the burial and resurrection of Jesus with a reference to the Sabbath (14:42, 15:1). Again, it's a pointer to the fact that in the death and resurrection of Jesus God's final purposes for his creation find their fulfilment.

The words of the angel in v.6-7 summarise the events and conclude the Gospel - Jesus has been crucified (as he said he would be) is risen (as he said he would be) and has gone before them into Galilee (as he said he would 14:28). What's more Peter is singled out from the disciples to hear the news (v.7). There is hope - Peter the arch denier will be restored and forgiven because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. If Peter can be forgiven then anyone can!

The Gospel has an infamously abrupt ending in v.8, concluding on a note of fear. There might be a number of reasons for this:

- The original ending was lost. If it was then it was lost according to the providence of God and he wanted the Gospel to end this way.
- Mark leaves the reader hanging asking 'what happens next?' Most readers would know - the church expands!
- Mark has made clear from the beginning that this is the beginning to the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1). His main concern is Jesus and he concludes all he wants to say about Jesus in v.6-7. He has had a fairly low view of human spiritual ability throughout the gospel (e.g. 7:14ff) and so deliberately ends by contrasting the victorious faithfulness of Jesus (v.7) with the fear of his followers (v.8). Jesus is so great that he will build his church even through these.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- Thank God for Mark's gospel.
- How have you grown to know Jesus better through it?
- How have you grown to know yourself better through it?
- Do you line up with centurion and Joseph or with the crowd?