



A Lenten Bible Reading Plan for the Gospel of Mark

February 19-April 1

Mountain Brook Baptist Church
www.mbbc.org



Mark

ABOUT PROJECT 119

Project 119 is a Bible reading initiative of Mountain Brook Baptist Church. Our hope is that every member of our church family would be encouraged in his or her relationship with Jesus Christ through the regular reading of God's Word.

This reading plan will guide you through the gospel of Mark during the season of Lent. The plan provides you a devotional thought and Scripture reading for each day of the week. On the weekends, we suggest that you re-read the Scripture passages that you have been working through during the past week (with the exception of Holy Week, when we will have readings on Saturday and Sunday).

To receive email updates when devotionals are added to the blog, go to www.mbbc.org/blog, click on "Subscribe to Mountain Brook Blog by Email" and follow the instructions. To learn more about Project 119 and to access previous plans, visit www.mbbc.org/project119.

INTRODUCTION

Mark 1:1 gives us a summary of his work: it is "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1:1). This word gospel, in the Greek, means good news. Mark's gospel shares the good news of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. The tradition of church history affirms that Mark was the first of the four New Testament gospels to be written. In some senses, then, Mark was the first person to put the verbal "good news" or "gospel" of Christ into a written form for an audience. Most scholars believe that Mark wrote his gospel somewhere in the mid 50s to mid 60s AD. It was likely written from Rome to a primarily Gentile audience, which is the reason that we see Mark carefully explaining several Jewish customs in his gospel. While Mark was not an eyewitness to the life and death of Christ, many believe that his account came from Peter. The gospel originally spread through oral accounts from the disciples, but later, these accounts were written down to edify and encourage the church (so that they might read again the testimonies they heard from the disciples). A further benefit of these written testimonies is that they could be sent to other places and thus the gospel might be proclaimed "to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15).

You'll observe that Mark's gospel is remarkably different than the other gospels in the New Testament in some ways. It is the shortest of the gospels and contains less of Jesus' direct teaching than any other gospel. You may also notice that Mark's gospel leaves out Christ's birth narrative entirely. However, Mark contains many "unique, once-only events (not recorded in the other gospels) especially those connected with the death and resurrection of Jesus" (Hans F. Bayer, ESV Study Bible). While we can't know why one gospel decided to include some events and others didn't, we must remember that gospels are not thorough, linear biographies of Christ in the way that we understand biographies. Rather, the gospels, written through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, each look at the life of Christ from a different lens. For instance, Mark highlights Christ as both the Jewish Messiah and the Lord over all, connecting Christ's fulfillment of Jewish messianic prophecies with the truth that He came to bring salvation to the Gentiles



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along with the Jews. Another theme repeated in Mark's gospel is the theme of discipleship. Christ, faithful to the Father, walked obediently all the way to the cross. As Christians, we too are called to follow in His footsteps, which will inevitably mean that we will face opposition from the world and suffering because of the presence of sin.

As you read through the gospel of Mark during this Lenten season, our prayer is that your heart will be opened to the good news of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and that you will respond in obedience to this call to come and follow Him, whatever the cost.

WEEK ONE: FEBRUARY 19-25 MARK 1-2

Monday, February 19 | Mark 1:1-8 | Doug Dortch

"Preparing the Way"

The gospel of Mark has been called an "action" gospel. It doesn't take the reader long to realize that Jesus is in a hurry to get to some place. The word "immediately" occurs 42 times in a 16 chapter gospel! So, where is Jesus in such a hurry to get? The answer should not surprise anyone. Jesus is rapidly moving toward Calvary, where "the Son of Man (will give) His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The gospel begins with Jesus designated as "the Son of God," a name that will occur again at Calvary when a centurion confesses Jesus in that way (Mark 15:39). The opening scenes in the first chapter contain numerous testimonies to Jesus' significance in God's plan of salvation, the first of which is John the Baptist.

Each of the four gospels tells John's story because of his importance as the forerunner of the Messiah. Preparation was an important function of representatives tasked with removing obstructions from the path of a coming monarch. As "Son of God," a title often applied to Caesar, the Roman Emperor, Jesus deserves someone to clear the way for Him to come as the fulfillment of God's redemptive promises.

Great emphasis is placed on how John's baptism is so closely connected with the notion of repentance, which makes it a good text for us to hear as we move into the season of Lent, which is a time for self-examination, confession, and repentance. At a time like this one, we have the chance to look into our hearts to see if there is anything that is obstructing our witness to Christ today. If so, we need to confess it and turn from it so that the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8) might empower us to point others to Jesus in a clear and compelling way.



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Tuesday, February 20 | Mark 1:9-15 | Doug Dortch

“God’s Beloved Son”

As far as we know, Jesus spent most of His life in Nazareth before embarking on the ministry that would take Him to Calvary. Nazareth was a sleepy village in Galilee, not the sort of place from which anyone would have expected the Messiah to come. But the mention of Jesus coming from Galilee down to Judea to be baptized by John foreshadows the movement of Mark’s gospel.

John’s baptism was not necessary for Jesus to undergo because of any sin Jesus needed to confess and be forgiven for. Rather, His baptism in the Jordan symbolizes Jesus’ commitment to God’s mission, one that will eventually lead Him to the cross. Jesus’ willingness to give public testimony to His dedication to such a mission, regardless of its cost, is a testimony for all disciples to follow. It is why we Baptists interpret the ordinance of baptism as a public testimony of our faith and “the first step of our obedience.”

As John lifts Jesus from the water (a symbol of resurrection), the “tearing apart” of the heavens is a sign of how God’s new age of salvation has come to pass in the person of Jesus. The astute reader will keep this passage in mind when reading the last chapter and the way the temple curtain will also be torn apart as a signal of God’s new day (Mark 15:38). Moreover, the descent of the dove reflects God’s approval of Jesus. At the baptism of Jesus, all three persons of the Trinity are present: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is as if the fullness of God’s being celebrates the work that Jesus is about to do.

But no sooner does Jesus emerge from the waters of baptism than the same Spirit that descended upon Him in the Jordan drives Him into the nearby wilderness to be tempted of Satan. Granted, Mark’s temptation account is briefer than those in the other gospels. Nonetheless, the emphasis on the 40 days (Mark 1:13) recalls the experience of Moses in the desert and the period of testing through which God’s people had to go on their journey to Canaan (Exodus 23:18, 34:28). Mark adds how it wasn’t just Satan that Jesus had to contend with. There were also “wild animals” (Mark 1:14). But God kept Jesus safe in the face of all His trials by means of angels, even as God’s angels also had attended the children of Israel during their wilderness sojourn.

What’s important for us to note in this text is that even God’s “beloved Son” had to undergo a period of testing. Far from being a manifestation of God’s wrath, this time proved to be one of preparation for the mission God sent Jesus to fulfill. The next time you go through a difficult period, instead of seeing it as God’s displeasure, ask yourself how you might be strengthened from it for the work God has for you to do. The same Spirit that accompanied Jesus is also with you. You have nothing to fear. The reality of your tribulation may in fact be the best evidence of God’s pleasure with you and His confidence that you are a worthy servant for His mission in the world.



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Wednesday, February 21 | Mark 1:16-45 | Doug Dortch

“Come and Follow”

After the imprisonment of John the Baptist, the way is paved for Jesus to begin His ministry. But Jesus does not minister alone. His first order of business is to call disciples, who will join with Him in the task God has given Him.

The first disciples Jesus calls are Simon and Andrew. His call is definite and demands total commitment. “Follow Me, and I will send you out to fish for people” (Mark 1:17). Consistent with Mark’s gospel, these two brothers “immediately” leave their nets behind to follow Jesus. The next two disciples are also brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They are also fishermen. Jesus calls them “immediately” and they too leave their nets and father behind to follow Jesus.

Jesus’ call comes where we are, as we are, but with a vision of what we might become. Little wonder these two sets of brothers left their old world behind to seize the new one Jesus was inviting them to know.

With these disciples in tow, Jesus journeys to Capernaum, a village that was to become His adopted home. Their first stop was the synagogue, an important institution in Jesus’ day where people could go to study the Scriptures and worship God. Here, Jesus takes advantage of the custom that allowed visiting teachers to participate in worship leadership at the invitation of the synagogue elders. Jesus’ teaching “amazes” the people (a signal theme in Mark) because of how Jesus teaches with divine authority, not human authority.

While Jesus is teaching, a demon challenges Jesus’ authority. Ironically, the demon bears witness to Jesus’ true identity as “the Holy One of God.” One of the ironies of Mark’s gospel is that the powers of darkness always know who Jesus is, while the people whom Jesus came to redeem always seem to be baffled, until Calvary where everything becomes clear. When this demon challenges Jesus, Jesus muzzles the power of the demonic, which proves His authority in the eyes of the people.

Jesus leaves that encounter to perform more miracles in Capernaum, including a healing for Simon’s mother-in-law. These miracles, along with His teaching, are a testimony to His divine authority, but Jesus will not let the demons speak their witness, because Jesus does not trust them to get the testimony right. Only His disciples can be trusted with such a witness.

Following this series of miracles, Jesus prepares Himself through prayer for the first of what will be three preaching and healing tours in the region of Galilee. His first encounter is with a leper, whom Jesus touches and heals. The touch is significant because it is a violation of the law of Moses (Leviticus 13). Such a show of compassion on Jesus’ part for those considered untouchable shows the depth of Jesus’ concern for those



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who cannot help themselves. Upon his healing, Jesus sends the leper to the priest, with specific instructions not to divulge the source of his healing. However, the healed leper spread the news nonetheless, which results in an increase of popularity for Jesus, but also an increase in the threat Jesus will now pose to the religious establishment.

Jesus' invitation to follow Him is an invitation to confront the evil in this world in both its secular and spiritual forms. It's an invitation that comes to everyone, but requires our decisive response. For those who do so "immediately," we experience amazing things that only God can do. Little wonder those first fishermen said "yes." The possibilities Jesus creates are ones we never could know on any path other than the one He leads us down.

Thursday, February 22 | Mark 2:1-17 | Doug Dortch

"Who Can Forgive Sins?"

The problem of sin is the base challenge for us humans. We may wrestle with a host of challenges, but the one challenge that is beyond us is that of our sin. Because we can't do enough good to eradicate our sinful past, we need a Savior to bring God's power to bear to help us in ways in which we could never help ourselves. During His second visit to Capernaum, Jesus heals a paralytic, which He intends to be a symbol of His authority to heal an even deeper malady, the sickness of sin.

A huge and enthusiastic crowd has gathered in Capernaum to hear Jesus. It's not the first time. Mark tells us how Jesus had amazed the crowd earlier with His teaching and healing before leaving for a time of spiritual renewal. Now Jesus has returned and people have come out of the woodwork to hear what Jesus has to say and what He has to do.

Among the people is a paralyzed man who has been brought to Jesus by four of his friends. When the men see that the press of the crowd is so great that they can't get their friend to Jesus, they go to the roof, break through its mud/thatch construction to lower their brother to Jesus' feet. When Jesus sees the faith that all of them have expressed, the first words out of his mouths are words of forgiveness. "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Among the crowd are some teachers of the law. They hear what Jesus says to the man and they are not pleased. Forgiveness is God's work. Anyone who would think that he could do anything about sin would be putting himself on equal standing with the divine, which would be blasphemous.

What would make these teachers of the law so touchy about Jesus' compassion? Part of it was rank jealousy. Part of it was their resentment over how Jesus was attracting crowds that surely must have taken away from the numbers of people who had been coming to hear them teach. But part of it was something deeper and more pernicious. Whenever forgiveness becomes something that get passed out freely and



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without being requested, how then will we be able to assert our spiritual authority over others? Jesus could see through their impure motives and answers them with a deeply penetrating question: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’” Then, to show His own spiritual authority to forgive sins, that’s exactly what Jesus did. He commanded the paralytic to walk, and to everyone’s amazement, that’s exactly what the paralytic did.

As Jesus leaves Capernaum, he encounters a tax collector named Levi, son of Alphaeus. Given that tax collectors were viewed as “lowlifes” in the first-century Jewish world, Levi is a different sort of sinner. His allegiance to Rome’s oppressive tax system does not win him any friends, except for other sinners. Jesus invites Levi to become a disciple, which Levi accepts. Before you know it, Jesus has gathered in Levi’s home with all manner of outcasts and has drawn the ire of the religious establishment. When pressed as to why Jesus would hang out with such characters, Jesus’ reply hits to the heart of His redemptive mission: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

Jesus’ response reminds us that not only is no one beyond the pale of salvation, no one is beyond the pale of discipleship either. As sinners, we are need of forgiveness, the experience of which empowers us in joining Jesus in the work of salvation God has sent Him to fulfill. Whether it involves taking other friends to Jesus, as did the friends of the paralytic, or hosting a gathering where we invite others to experience Jesus’ call, as did Levi, all of us have something we can contribute to Jesus’ cause and therefore extend His life-changing ministry in truly amazing ways.

Friday, February 23 | Mark 2:18-28 | Doug Dortch

“When Do We Eat?”

By this point in Mark’s gospel, Jesus has drawn the attention of the religious establishment, and their ire. Clearly, He taught and did miracles that pointed to His belief that God had sent Him to do a “new thing,” one that upset those who stood to benefit most from the status quo.

For example, Jesus didn’t observe strict fasting regulations of the law that had come to be supplemented by additional expectations. According to the law of Moses, fasting was required only for one day out of the year, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16, 23). After the exile in Babylon, three additional fast days were added. Then, by the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had decided that it would be best to fast two days a week. Therefore, when people didn’t see Jesus and His disciples participating in such regular ritual behavior, they were confused as to His reasoning. Jesus’ answer that the guests of the bridegroom choose to celebrate as long as the bridegroom is with them doesn’t dismiss the importance of the ritual; it only suspends it for the time when Jesus’ disciples will observe it after His crucifixion. Once again Calvary looms in the background of Mark’s account of the Jesus story.



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The next controversy centers on the Sabbath, which was the most revered observance in all Judaism. According to Jewish tradition, harvesting was forbidden on the Sabbath, which led the Pharisees to call out Jesus and His disciples for plucking grain when they should have been observing Sabbath rest.

Jesus answers the Pharisees' challenge by pointing out the manner in which David and his followers dared to enter into the temple to partake of the consecrated bread because they were so hungry (1 Samuel 21:6). As the "Son of David," Jesus saw no problem following suit. In His way of thinking, doing good is always lawful, particularly when a life is in the balance—both literally and spiritually.

To understand what is involved in following Jesus we must be willing to consider new ways of serving God's redemptive purposes. While those purposes are unchanging, the means by which we serve them often do. Rituals are important, but unless they are connected to life-giving power, they will ultimately devolve into meaningless practice. It is always better to further the cause of Christ in every opportunity that comes our way, because His authority towers over every rule and regulation, and His grace meets our deepest needs as nothing else can do.

Saturday, February 24-Sunday, February 25 | Mark 1-2

Reread Mark 1-2 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



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WEEK TWO: FEBRUARY 26-MARCH 4 MARK 3-5

Monday, February 26 | Mark 3:1-12 | Mary Splawn

Did you and your family have special traditions or specific plans on Sundays when you were growing up? When I was a little girl, my family didn't go out to eat on Sundays because, at the time, my parents saw this as a way of following God's command of Sabbath rest.

The Pharisees probably grew up with a very strict Sabbath routine as well. Observing the Sabbath rest was a commandment that God had given the Israelites, but the Pharisees added to this commandments rules upon rules in order to make sure that no one ever came close to transgressing the command. So, not only did they avoid work; they even limited how far people were allowed to walk on this sacred day. I guess a Fitbit would have come in handy to them!

All kidding aside, the Jewish leaders probably meant well in their attempts to obey the rules that they had constructed to help keep the Sabbath as a day of rest. The problem is that they lost focus on what really mattered...worshiping God and serving Him.

So, when Jesus asks them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?," they are silent because they know that healing the man would be considered work by the religious leaders of the day. Jesus is furious with them and He says they have "stubborn hearts."

Perhaps they were well-meaning, but their hearts were deceived. They thought they knew what was best, but their legalistic practice led their hearts astray. This reminds me of the verse in Jeremiah 17:9 which speaks about the heart. It says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure."

The truth of the matter is that all of us have wicked and deceitful hearts, not just the Pharisees. But in a cultural setting where we're told to follow our hearts and do what feels right, this verse hits us hard. How can something be sin when it feels so right?

This passage calls us all on the carpet. It reminds us that Jesus sees our hearts and sometimes a test of our faith is our response to injustice. Also, it reminds us that well-meaning Christians can often be in sin if they are following their hearts and not the truth of Scripture.

Take some time to confess your wayward heart to the Lord. I know it sounds harsh, but there is freedom in recognizing your natural state. Then ask the Lord to reveal ways you are blinded by your culture or your heart to the sin in your life. Call out with David in the words of Psalm 51:10, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."



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Tuesday, February 27 | Mark 3:13-34 | Mary Splawn

In this passage, we have what commentators call a “Markan Sandwich.” This is where Mark interrupts one story with what may appear to be an unrelated story. But, they aren’t unrelated at all. In fact, the combination of the verses brings a powerful teaching point!

In this passage we see:

- a. Rejection by Jesus’ Family 3:20-21 (bread)
- b. Rejection by Jewish Leaders 3:22-30 (meat)
- c. Rejection by Jesus’ Family 3:31-35 (bread)

I think Mark breaks up the story about Jesus’ family just to highlight the depth of rejection. Not only do the Jewish leaders misunderstand who He is—His own family rejects him as well!

While Jesus receives rejection from those closest to Him and also from the leaders of the people He has come to save, He is surrounded by some people He considers family. Look at why He considers them His true family—because they do God’s will.

What I notice in this story is the physical proximity of the people to Jesus who are doing His will. Mark tells us they are sitting in a circle around Him. This reminds me that the most important factor in doing God’s will is being in God’s presence. Take some time this morning to remember the PERSON of Christ. Imagine yourself sitting in a circle with other disciples surrounding Him. Rest in His presence and ask for Him to illuminate your life and show you the way you should go today!

Note: I understand that this passage can be difficult for many who wonder about the unpardonable sin mentioned here. One commentator helped clarify this issue for me: “The idea of an unforgivable sin has haunted the minds of sensitive people in all Christian centuries, but all such anxiety is misdirected. As the context makes plain, Jesus’ warning is against disregarding His message by calling it Satanic (see esp. 3:30), a quite specific deed. A person doing such a thing would have no concern about Christ’s forgiveness for it. So, the very anxiety lest one may have done something that cuts one off from Christ’s forgiveness is, ironically, evidence that one believes Christ to be sent from God, and thus proof that one cannot have committed the sin warned against here” (*New International Biblical Commentary on Mark*, Hurtado, 66).

Wednesday, February 28 | Mark 4:1-20 | Mary Splawn

When thinking about how this parable might help reshape our focus during this season of the year, I am drawn to the specific image of the good soil producing the crop. In order to produce a stellar crop, the ground has to be ready. It needs watering, fertilization, and perhaps a bit of tilling to make it ready for growth.

The same is true for us. As believers, we are called to prepare our hearts to make them ready to produce fruit.



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In order to get our soil ready, we might ask ourselves a few questions: 1) Do I think of God as more of an idea or a person who desires relationship with me? 2) Do I give lip-service to my dependence on God or do I trust Him for my every need? 3) Am I practicing disciplines of the faith that will help me keep rooted in hard times (i.e. fasting, prayer, reflection, communal worship, praise)? 4) Am I giving of myself and my resources so that others might flourish and know the good news about Jesus?

Oh Lord, during this season of Lent, please provide nourishment for our souls. Also, please till up all the bad habits that might be buried just below the surface of our hearts. Root out the bad that is within us and make us people who live fruitful lives, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thursday, March 1 | Mark 4:21-34 | Mary Splawn

As we're gearing up for March Madness, I can't help but think of how difficult it would be to play in front on thousands of boisterous fans. All the heckling and booing would surely get to me after a while.

When I read Mark 4:21-33, I imagine Jesus sitting on a hillside teaching to a rule following crowd that were as quiet as people in a library, but that probably wasn't the reality. Instead of a serene environment that we see portrayed in children's Bible books, Jesus' teaching on the hillside might have been more the scene when a North Carolina player is on the free-throw line in Cameron Stadium at Duke University.

Okay—maybe I'm exaggerating a bit. But you get the point. Jesus didn't always teach to just His team. He also taught crowds that may have been filled with people who were hostile to His message.

This may be one of the reasons Jesus taught in parables, a sort of subversive speech that requires people to ponder the message He was bringing. He taught messages that packed a punch, but took some time to decipher. What is He talking about? Lamps on stands and mustard seeds?

Throughout the day, ponder the parable of the lamp on a stand, the growing seed, and the mustard seed. Ask the Lord to reveal to you how you might continue to be a light for God's growing kingdom.

Friday, March 2 | Mark 4:35-5:43 | Mary Splawn

In this passage, we see Jesus showing His power over nature, demons, and sickness.

Jesus' overwhelming power is highlighted in these stories because the scenarios are so extreme! With the weather disturbance, it wasn't just any little storm—it was a furious squall. Yet, in the face of Jesus, the wind and the waves calmed down.

The man who lived among the tombs wasn't just possessed by one demon. Rather, a legion of them were wild within his body. Yet, the multitude of demons were no match for the commanding presence of Jesus the Son of God.



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The woman Jesus healed from her bleeding disease had suffered for 13 years with no help from medical doctors. Yet, at the touch of Jesus' robe, she was healed.

Finally, Jesus' power was not even matched by death itself. When others said there was chance at recovery and no reason to bother the teacher, Jesus reassures the girl's parents. Then He takes the little girl by the hand and with the words "Talitha koum!," He raises her up!

Jesus' power is displayed in a multitude of ways to confirm in the hearts of people both then and now that Jesus is Lord of all!

Take some time to remember Jesus' power displayed in Scripture and in your life. Use the words of Psalm 97 (which highlights the power of God) as your guide in prayer today!

Saturday, March 3-Sunday, March 4 | Mark 3-5

Reread Mark 3-5 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



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WEEK THREE: MARCH 5-11

MARK 6:1-9:1

Monday, March 5 | Mark 6:1-29 | Wayne Splawn

Will following Jesus make your life better? When we hear this question, most of us would probably answer with a resounding “Yes!,” and while I certainly agree that we should answer this question in the affirmative, I also think we need to be reminded that better is not synonymous with easier or even happier. Here in Mark 6:1-29, Mark reminds us of the costs often associated with following Jesus and he highlights the rejection and suffering that often accompany those who decide to follow after Jesus.

In Mark 6:1-6, we read that Jesus is rejected by those who know Him best. Jesus teaches with wisdom and He performs mighty works, but people in His hometown are filled with disbelief because they know Jesus came from humble origins. Jesus’ ministry was limited in His hometown because the people there were filled with unbelief and Jesus is astonished they would respond to Him in this way. In Mark 6:7-13, Jesus sends the disciples out two by two with authority over unclean spirits. As Jesus prepares them for the mission ahead, He tells them how to respond when they are rejected by others. Jesus is certain that dealing with rejection will be part and parcel of what it means to follow Him. Finally, in Mark 6:14-29, we read of the death of John the Baptist. Rather than telling Herod and Herodias what they wanted to hear, John tells them an unpopular truth that will eventually cost him his life. Jesus, the disciples, and John the Baptist are all reminders of the truth that the life of faithful people often result in rejection.

Will following Jesus make your life better? Absolutely. Does this mean your life will be easier or happier in the short term? No. As we will see once again in our readings on Friday there are definite costs associated with following Jesus. But, we must always remember that what we gain in following Jesus is much more valuable than anything we will be called to give up. How might Jesus be calling you to endure rejection and hardship as you seek to follow Him faithfully?

Tuesday, March 6 | Mark 6:30-56 | Wayne Splawn

How do you see people in need? If I am honest I often view people in need as an inconvenience to be dealt with rather than as people made in God’s image, people God calls me to serve in Jesus’ name. After all, most of us are so busy and preoccupied with our own list of things we need to accomplish that we have a hard time finding the time or the emotional energy necessary to do everything in our power to serve others.

In Mark 6:30-44, the disciples are understandably worn out. They have just returned to Jesus after completing a ministry trip and Jesus recognizes their need for rest. So, they get in a boat and travel to a desolate place, but rather than finding a place of respite from the demands of ministry, they are greeted by throngs of needy people. But, when Jesus sees them He is not annoyed by their presence or disappointed that He and the disciples will not be able to enjoy some much-needed rest and relaxation. Instead, Mark tells us that Jesus had compassion for the people because they were like sheep without shepherd. This is



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standard Old Testament language used to describe the situation God's people face without faithful leaders. Jesus is moved by the plight of the the people and He decides to do something about their struggles. Rather than send them away to fend for themselves as the disciples suggest, Jesus challenges the disciples to feed them. The disciples do not have the food necessary to feed the multitude, but Jesus instructs them to bring what they have to Him and Jesus takes their inadequate resources and multiplies them so that the people are satisfied and there is even plenty leftover.

Are you usually more like the disciples or Jesus when faced with people in need? Are you filled with compassion that moves you to do something no matter how small—or do you send people away to fend for themselves? Ask God to give you a heart of compassion for the people God puts in your path.

Wednesday, March 7 | Mark 7:1-30 | Wayne Splawn

When it comes to our physical health, it is possible to look perfectly healthy on the outside while having a serious heart condition. Often times the true condition of the heart is only revealed when a person has a heart attack and others are shocked to learn that the victim was sick. Looking only at outward appearances can be very misleading.

The same is true of our spiritual health. As people watch our lives, they may arrive at the conclusion that we are healthy in terms of our spiritual life. We may go to church every Sunday, read our Bibles most every day, place our tithes and offerings in the collection plate at church, and even say things that would lead others to believe we are in a right relationship with God. However, these things are not necessarily indications of spiritual health. It may be that we are like the people we read about in Mark 7:1-13. These Pharisees and scribes were experts when it came to the law and very zealous in their attempts to keep the traditions of the elders. But, Jesus says something frightening about them in Mark 7:6-7. Mark writes, "And [Jesus] said to them, 'Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" Everyone in their day would have assumed the Pharisees and scribes were righteous by looking at their outward appearances. The condition of their hearts revealed something much different. Rather than being close to God, their hearts were far from Him.

Lent affords us a great opportunity to examine our hearts. Spend some time in prayer and reflection today. Ask God to help you see the true condition of your heart. Are you going through the motions of faith while having a heart that is far from God? Ask the Lord to continually give you a heart that is close to Him.

Thursday, March 8 | Mark 7:31-8:26 | Wayne Splawn

In Mark 7:31-37 we read of Jesus healing a deaf man and in Mark 8:22-26, we read of Jesus healing a blind man. In both instances, the men who were healed by Jesus knew they needed healing. The deaf man and the blind man were acutely aware of their physical ailments. But sandwiched in the middle of these two stories we read a conversation between Jesus and His disciples that reminds us that it is possible to be oblivious to the fact that we are deaf and blind.



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The conversation follows a second feeding miracle in the gospel of Mark. Back in chapter six, Mark records his account of Jesus feeding five thousand people and in 8:1-10, we read Mark's account of Jesus feeding four thousand people. Following the miracle recorded in 8:1-10, Jesus and His disciples travel to the other side of the sea and Mark informs the reader that the disciples had forgotten to bring bread with them. Jesus then warns them to watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod—and the disciples mistakenly think Jesus is talking about the fact that they had forgotten the bread. Exasperated with His disciples' lack of understanding, Jesus asks them, "Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" Were they so quick to forget Jesus' feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand that they were still worried about whether or not they had enough bread? How could they be so focused on the physical that they could not understand Jesus' teaching about more important spiritual matters?

If we're honest, we are all prone to follow the disciples' lead in this area. We get so focused on the things we can see and hear that we are often blind and deaf to the more important spiritual realities of God's kingdom. And the dangerous thing about spiritual deafness and blindness is that we are usually unaware that we cannot see or hear. Spend some time in prayer and reflection and ask God to show you ways you have become so focused on material things that you have become unaware of the more important matters of God's kingdom. Ask God to give you eyes that can see and ears that can hear.

Friday, March 9 | Mark 8:27-9:1 | Wayne Splawn

Mark 8:27-9:1 is a section of critical importance on Mark's gospel. Jesus asks His disciples who they say He is and Peter correctly responds that Jesus is the Christ. However, this moment of triumph is short-lived. When Jesus tells Peter that He will suffer, be killed, and rise on the third day, Peter rebukes Jesus. When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, Peter had images of victory in his mind and Jesus' description of His impending death sounded like certain defeat. Peter would not allow Jesus to ruin his expectations of Jesus' coming triumph with prophecies of His impending death. Jesus' response seems unnecessarily harsh to most modern ears. Why didn't Jesus simply take Peter aside and explain that he was mistaken? Why call him Satan?

Jesus knew the seriousness of Peter's misunderstanding. If Jesus did not submit to the Father's plan by willingly laying down His life, He would not be able to accomplish the purpose for which He was sent. Jesus' death and resurrection were not incidental parts of His ministry. They were the aspects of His ministry through which God accomplished our salvation. They are the parts of Jesus' life on earth that give all other aspects of His life meaning and eternal significance.

Taking up a cross and engaging in self-denial were not aspects of God's will for Jesus alone. Yes, Jesus was the only one worthy to die on the cross and accomplish our salvation. But, Jesus makes it clear that self-denial and taking up a cross are necessary acts for anyone who would follow after Him. To gain our lives, we must lose them. Conversely, if we gain the whole world, but forfeit our souls, we have lost everything. As we continue to journey through the season of Lent, we are reminded of that we are called to deny



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ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus Christ. Doing so will often feel like death, but in reality this is the only path by which we might experience that which is truly life.

Saturday, March 10-Sunday, March 11 | Mark 6:1-9:1

Reread Mark 6:1-9:1 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this weekend.



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WEEK FOUR: MARCH 12-18

MARK 9:2-10:52

Monday, March 12 | Mark 9:2-29 | Allison McSwain

“Plan A”

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus reveals His divine glory to Peter, James, and John with some special guests present. Here we get the most beautiful picture of the seamlessness of God's plan: Moses and Elijah, two prominent Old Testament men of God, appear with Jesus. What a holy moment—the Law, represented by Moses, and the Prophets, represented by Elijah—finally find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. I can only imagine what their conversation was like. I picture Moses and Elijah, eyes wide, thinking “This is it! This is what it was all for.”

It is crucial that we realize that Jesus was not God's “plan B.” After the Resurrection, Jesus enlightens some men of this truth while walking the road to Emmaus: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). From the beginning of time, God our Father had been planning to send His Son to reconcile sinful humanity to Himself. Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, John the Baptist—all of history, all of Scripture, points to Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God.

Peter makes a mistake here. He proposes making tents for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, wrongly putting Jesus on the same level as the other two. Peter wants to make an earthly habitation for a clearly divine Jesus. How often you and I want to pull Jesus down to our level just the same. We hide Jesus, God incarnate, away in the box we designate for Him instead of beholding His glory. We live in a culture that readily accepts Jesus as a great moral teacher, yet frowns upon his divinity. Are you guilty of forgetting that Jesus is fully God as well as man, able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20)? Do you doubt His power, believing that He cannot fix your situation?

On days when we forget who Jesus really is, may our prayer be that of the father in verse 24: “I believe; help my unbelief!” Behold the glory of God's Son today—His “plan A,” our salvation.

Tuesday, March 13 | Mark 9:30-50 | Allison McSwain

“The Greatest”

I don't know about you, but I often catch myself mentally “poking fun” at the disciples. So many times in the gospels we see them completely missing the mark, all the while Jesus is right in front of them. They lack faith and they do exactly what Jesus preaches not to do. Sounds like you and I sometimes, right? I'm always convicted after judging them.



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In today's reading, we encounter two examples of the sin of pride along with a startling passage about the gravity of sin in general. On the way to Capernaum, the disciples argue about who is the greatest—the one with the highest status, the most honorable, the one that will receive the best place in the kingdom. Instead of offering a harsh rebuke, Jesus gently urges them to sit down and listen.

If you wish to be great, Jesus says, you must be a servant. You must put yourself last, not first. You must put your pride to death. Jesus absolutely has the authority to give this charge, as He is the perfect example of humility: God come down to serve humanity.

The disciples don't exactly learn this lesson the first time. John seems to exhibit some kind of elitism in the next passage. The disciples have tried to stop a man from casting out demons in Jesus' name because he wasn't a member of their group. Once again, Jesus responds with gentleness: "the one who is not against us is for us." Christians are not an elitist group. We are all given the same mandate, and all have equal standing at the foot of the cross. Pride has no place in the church.

Our reading today ends with a strong charge to avoid temptation. Sin is so serious and so dangerous that if one's hand causes him or her to sin, it would be better to just chop it off. Brothers and sisters, I feel we Americans are far too tolerant of our pride. We, like the disciples, wish to be the greatest and will often go to great lengths to ensure this

Let us be mindful of imitating Christ's humility today. The One who is the greatest came to serve, so let us do likewise. Let us avoid pride at all costs.

Wednesday, March 14 | Mark 10:1-16 | Allison McSwain

"Like a Wife, Like a Child"

God loves the family. Family was God's idea, after all: He created the first one in Genesis. Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 in today's reading as he discusses marriage and divorce with the Pharisees: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

We see that divorce breaks God's heart because divorce was never God's will for marriage. In Mark 10:5 Jesus reveals that Moses permitted divorce only because of the hardness of humanity's hearts—God hates to see marital unions dissolve. Why?

Time and time again in Scripture we see the Church described as the Bride of Christ. The body of believers is Jesus's wife. Marriage exists to portray that unity, that oneness, that will exist between Christ and his Bride at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 16:6-9). Wives are to submit to their husbands "as Christ is the head of the church" and husbands are to love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:22, 25). From Scripture, we then learn that marriage is not all about human



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happiness: It's about being an example of the love between Christ and His Church. Therefore may we be like a wife, faithful to Christ, loving Him more than all else.

May we also be like a child. Instead of rebuking the little children in Mark 10:13-16, Jesus uses them as an example of great faith. The kingdom belongs to those of childlike faith—those who are trusting, those who approach God with reverence and awe. Children are a picture of humility, and we are to emulate that humility when approaching and beholding our Father. May we remember that we are just like children when it comes to dependence on Christ.

Father, thank you for the gift of family. May my own family be a shining example of Your love and grace. Help me to be faithful, like a bride, to You and Your Word. Help me to remain as humble and obedient as a child. Amen.

Thursday, March 15 | Mark 10:17-31 | Allison McSwain

"All-In"

I've always found the story of the rich young man quite sad. This man wants so desperately to be with God forever in the afterlife, but he doesn't understand the true way to get there. The rich young man holds a view of works-based salvation, asking what he can do to inherit eternal life. He tells Jesus that he has kept all the commandments. This man has lived a moral life, but is that enough to get him into heaven?

Jesus loves this man despite his misunderstanding of salvation. He tests the rich man's faith by asking him to give all he has to the poor and then follow Jesus. Now, the giving of the riches is not what would have saved the man from the consequences of his sins. Jesus is not advocating works-based salvation. Humans can do no good thing in order to merit God's forgiveness. It is the accepting of God's grace and following of Christ that would have saved the rich man. Here, Jesus is testing the man to see if he is "all-in."

Unfortunately, the rich man does not heed Jesus's invitation to follow Him. To be a Christ follower, one cannot have one hand in heaven and one in the world. The rich man grasped so firmly onto his material possessions that he chose them over the treasures that could be laid up for him in heaven.

Examine your heart today. Are you "all-in" when it comes to following Jesus? What areas of your life are you, like the rich man, unwilling to give up for the sake of Christ? It can be incredibly difficult to let go of our possessions, hopes, dreams, and desires, but we see that it is not impossible if God is on our side. Ask the Lord to reveal the areas in your life that you are not giving over fully to Him. Thank Him that salvation cannot be earned, only graciously accepted as a free gift. Jesus paid it all for us; may we give up all for Him.



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Friday, March 16 | Mark 10:32-52 | Allison McSwain

“Your Faith Has Healed You”

When reading the rather short story of Jesus and Bartimaeus, we can quickly skim through and count it as just another one of Jesus’s many miracles. I want to challenge you, though, to look intently at this passage and the parallels it may have with your own salvation story.

Like Bartimaeus, you and I were blind before we received salvation. Perhaps we weren’t physically blind, but we were spiritually blind to the horror of our sin. We lived in ways that displeased God. We did not see the light. However, just as Jesus showed up in Jericho, Jesus showed up in up in our lives when we needed Him most. We did not travel to find Him, but He met us, beggars on the roadside, where we were.

Our prayer was that of Bartimaeus’s: “Jesus, have mercy on me!” We knew we could not heal ourselves of our sin sickness. Only by Christ’s mercy could we be made whole. Like Bartimaeus’s peers, many of us had believers encouraging us on and pushing us toward Christ: “Cheer up!” they’d say. We were reminded that Jesus was calling for us.

In humility we told Jesus that we wanted to see. We wanted to see the glory of the Father, and we wanted to see others as He did. We needed the sin that separated Him from view to be washed away. Jesus said to us what he told the blind man: “Your faith has made you well.” By faith we entered into the grace offered to us.

In response to this healing from sin, this salvation Christ gave us, we daily “follow Jesus along the road.” Receiving sight merits a response. In thankfulness, let us follow Jesus wherever He leads. Let us stay on the path, not straying from the way in which Christ walked. Rejoice today if Christ has healed you, not just physically, but spiritually as well!

Saturday, March 17-Sunday, March 18 | Mark 9:2-10:52

Reread Mark 9:2-10:52 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



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WEEK FIVE: MARCH 19-25 MARK 11-13

Monday, March 19 | Mark 11:1-11 | Kely Hatley

“The Messiah Enters Jerusalem”

Holy Week is one of the richest weeks in the Christian Calendar. While we are yet still one week away from it, our reading today is the one that starts Holy Week: Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem the week before His arrest and crucifixion. This day is called Palm Sunday for the Christian church and believer.

One of the things that intrigues me in this story is the use of the word “Hosanna.” You may know the story—how the people in Jerusalem lined the streets waving palms or branches and shouted “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father, David. Hosanna in the highest!” But what did they mean when shouting this?

The word “hosanna” is derived from a blending of two Hebrew words, “yasha” and “na.” “Yasha” is translated as “save.” “Na” may be translated in several ways, but most likely it is meant to be an opening such as “Oh!” So put together “hosanna” can be translated as “O save!” In this translated context, it is right for the people to shout this. As Jesus entered the city He was on His mission to save each of us from our sins. The people were right to cry “Hosanna” to Jesus: “O save us, Lord!”

Today, I fear that this meaning of the word has been replaced with a more generalized concept of a word expressing praise to God. Don’t get me wrong! I am definitely not opposed to giving God the praise He deserves, but to forget the original meaning of this word cheats us out of the deep, faith-forming knowledge that we are praying to God to save us from ourselves, from our sins, and from the weights of this life that so easily entangle and drag us down.

The next time you hear the word “hosanna,” take a moment to be sure what you are hearing are the words “O save!” and make that your heart’s cry to the Lord. Romans 3:23 states, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Each and every one of us needs the Savior to be saved! Call on Him today and shout aloud to Jesus in your own mind and life, “Hosanna! Blessed are You who comes in the name of the Lord! Save me Lord, Save me!”

Tuesday, March 20 | Mark 11:12-33 | Kely Hatley

“The Withered Fig Tree”

Today’s reading includes a very odd story in it: the withered fig tree. Many people say that this Jesus’ behavior to the fig tree is uncharacteristic for Him when compared with what we know of Jesus. When



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studying for this devotion I read several commentaries regarding the fig tree and Jesus' action against it. The Broadman Bible Commentary gives the explanation for this story as a comparison of the nation of Israel to the fig tree. In verse 13 we read that the fig tree was "in leaf." The fact that the fig tree already had leaves on it means that it had already produced some fruit. Fig trees form their first figs even before the leaves sprout and grow. Perhaps this is why Jesus approached the tree hoping that some figs were on it. Upon finding none, Jesus "cursed" the tree.

Scholars offer the symbolic comparison of the fruitless fig tree to the people of the nation of Israel because of their inability to recognize their Messiah in their midst. Additionally, they seemed to live by God's laws and worship Him through the temple, but like the fig tree, they were not producing any evidence that they were devoted to the Lord.

"The fig tree gave an appearance of health and usefulness, like Jerusalem with its temple, the center of the worship of God. Actually the religious life of Israel was barren and unreceptive. Was not Israel like the fig tree? Let it die! It has forfeited its religious leadership."¹

Does this story not strike us to the heart? It is easy for us to sometimes go through the motions of our Christian lives without really producing the fruit that a fully devoted follower of Jesus will produce. Galatians 5:22 says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control." During this Lenten season, take the time to bare your soul before God and pray for Him to help you move past the "motions" of Christian life to a deeper more substantive devotion to the Lord that will produce the fruit of a Christian life in every aspect of your surroundings and circles of influence.

Wednesday, March 21 | Mark 12:1-27 | Kely Hatley

"Paying Taxes to Caesar"

Today's passage includes the story of the Pharisees and the Herodians trying to trap Jesus by a single question. We know that the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders (Mark 12:27) were the ones who sent the Pharisees and the Herodians. They had been planning for a way to arrest Jesus but were afraid of the people. Their plan to trap Jesus using His own words was a resourceful one, but their plan did not succeed. They asked Jesus, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

The coins used in those times had the image of Tiberius Caesar Augustus with the inscription Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus on one side and the inscription Pontifex Maximus ("chief priest") on the other. The coin would have been offensive to some Jews because it insinuated that Caesar was divine and

¹ Clifton J. Allen, *The Broadman Bible Commentary, Volume 8 Matthew-Mark* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1969), 356.



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chief religious leader, as the high priest of the imperial Roman cult. Jesus knew the weight of the question asked of Him (for He knew that the people would be stirred up easily or He could be arrested on the spot if He didn't answer carefully). He answered it swiftly and with wisdom, illustrating the lesson to give what is due from you to those in authority over you as well as to the Lord.

What I love most about this story are the words spoken to Jesus in preface to the posed question. In verse 14 we read, "Teacher, we know You are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because You pay no attention to who they are; but You teach the way of God in accordance with the truth." Wow, even while reading it and knowing the background of those saying it, I can just imagine their words dripping with sarcasm. The Bible doesn't tell us, but I imagine them making this statement quite loudly so as to attract the attention of those around Jesus. Can't you hear it?

But I can also see something beautiful in what they said. Place the sarcasm aside and you are left with a beautiful description of how our Lord lived His life. He lived faithfully in accordance with His Father's truth bending to no man's ways or ideas because He was not concerned with their social standing. How many mistakes have we made in our lives just because we were trying to please others and not "rock the boat?" It's great that Jesus was a wave maker! Even when posed such a tough question, He was not confused in the least.

During your Lenten walk to the cross, pray to the Lord for strength to live your life in a way that reflects the description found here in this reading of how Jesus lived His life. Resist the temptation to bend your Christian convictions to the ways of those around you based on what they might think of you because of who they are. Live your life with confidence in the Lord's strength to be the best witness for Christ that you can be.

Thursday, March 22 | Mark 12:28-44 | Kely Hatley

"Giving Your All"

This one is going to be an "ouch" one for all of us today I think...one of the stories in the reading for today is that of the widow who gives her offering while Jesus observes those who are giving their gifts. You may know the story. Many were coming by the treasury to place their offerings. The Bible says in verses 41-42 that "Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny."

Wow...a fraction of a penny? Think about that for a moment. Our pennies today (while they really do have small monetary value) are just about worthless to us. In fact, often times when I pay cash for something and the total might be something like \$2.83, the clerk will often give me change as if the total were \$2.80 so he doesn't have to give pennies back in change. Most convenience store counters have those little "Give a



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Penny/Take a Penny” containers at their registers because pennies are worth so little now they are discarded by most people.

Yet, Jesus told His disciples that the widow’s very small offering was worth more than the offering of the rich people who gave much. The reason Jesus gave for His assessment was that the rich people gave money that they had and it did not hurt them to give, but the widow gave all that she had to God. Therefore it cost her everything—the Bible says, “all she had to live on.” What depth of devotion is demonstrated by this nameless woman!

How does this story of giving translate to us today? We all understand money and we live in an affluent section of our society. What might be a commodity that would impact us in the way that the widow was impacted by her gift? We often hear that “time” is now the most valuable commodity we have today. I would ask us all to take a discerning look at our lives to determine what activities, hobbies, or work use the most of our time commodity. How does your spiritual life rank in the giving column of your time commodity? Are you investing in it? Are you nurturing it with your time to allow God to help you to grow and mature? Or, are you giving just enough to appear like the rich folk in the story but it really costs you nothing? Consider the cost in your life to follow Jesus as we continue walking this Lenten journey together.

Friday, March 23 | Mark 13 | Kely Hatley

“The Apocalyptic Chapter”

Chapter 13 of Mark is filled with the language of the apocalypse. Verses 1-4 are telling of the coming doom of the temple; verses 5-13 deal with the coming of the false Christs, natural disasters, and harsh times for the disciples; verses 14-25 speaks about the “Abomination of Desecration” (which many think to be the Antichrist) and the horrible tribulation period that will take place; and lastly, verses 24-27 deal with the triumphal return of the Son of Man to gather the elect to him from all corners of the earth.

The part of the chapter for focus today is that of verses 28-37. These verses encourage all of us to be on our guard and to be alert. It is a lesson that is filled with urgency and truly encourages the readers to be prepared. This section of scripture should be one that fills all of us as believers with a willingness to be open to take that “walk across the room” as we have just recently studied as a church family. It should instill in each of us the desire to not be afraid to have conversations with others about our relationship with Jesus. This scripture needs no explanation. It stands for itself. Be on guard, keep watch. The Lord will return; will we be ready?

Hymn writer Fanny Crosby had a hymn about this scripture in the 1956 Baptist Hymnal. Her hymn, “Will Jesus Find Us Watching?,” captures the essence of Mark 13.



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*When Jesus comes to reward His servants,
Whether it be noon or night,
Faithful to Him will He find us watching,
With our lamps all trimmed and bright?*

*Oh, can we say we are ready brother?
Ready for the soul's bright home?
Say, will He find you and me still watching,
Waiting, watching when the Lord shall come?*

The great mystery of our faith is that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!" We should all heed the words of verses 32-33: "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come."

Saturday, March 24-Sunday, March 25 | Mark 11-13

Reread Mark 11-13 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



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WEEK SIX: MARCH 26-APRIL 1 MARK 14-16

Monday, March 26 | Mark 14:1-11 | Amy Jackson

I love the word juxtaposition. Its basic definition is to place two things side-by-side for comparison or contrast. You hear the term often when it comes to decorating or design—people refer to the juxtaposition of certain colors or styles. Yet juxtapositions can also happen in literature, and here in Mark 14:1-11, we see the juxtaposition of two responses to Jesus: those who come to Him in reverent worship (Mark 14:3-9), and those who fear Him and seek to destroy Him (Mark 14:1-2, 10-11).

The main focus of this section (at least in terms of the number of verses) seems to be Mark 14:3-9. We meet a woman with an expensive bottle of perfume and a mission. The nard, which probably originated from India, would have been kept in a bottle with a long neck, and the only way to dispel its contents would be to break it. She broke the neck of the bottle and poured out the nard on the head of Christ in an act of pure love and devotion. When onlookers scorned her worship, protesting that the proceeds from selling that perfume could have been used to feed the poor, Christ quickly came to her defense. He will die soon, and she has unknowingly anointed Him for burial (Mark 14:8).

This woman, who was unnamed in Mark's gospel but was likely Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (see Matthew 26:6-13, John 12:1-8), came to Christ with an act of extravagant worship. She recognized that Jesus was worth far more than the contents of that costly bottle. And yet I can't help but think about the juxtaposition of her worship placed beside those who scolded her (Mark 14:4-5), and the chief priests and scribes (Mark 14:1-2), along with Judas (Mark 14:10-11). She recognized Christ's worth and poured out all she had in worship, while the scribes and chief priests sought out how they might destroy Him (Mark 14:1-2).

The resolution of this passage always makes my heart fall. We see Judas, one of Christ's own disciples, conspire with the chief priests and scribes on how they might trap and destroy Jesus. It seems so ironic, doesn't it? Someone on the inside—in the inner ring of Christ's circle, even—chose betrayal rather than worship. And as I sit in the heaviness of this passage, I can't point my fingers at the offenders, because I too have betrayed Christ, time and time again, through my sin. The good news of the gospel, though, is that there is hope for Christ's offenders, and that through the power of the cross, even enemies become friends! When we fully gather what Christ has done for us through the cross, our response ought to be the same kind of sacrificial praise we see displayed in this unnamed woman, giving Christ all the glory and adoration He deserves because of His goodness and grace.

Lord, we stand condemned in our sin and have rejected You, like the chief priests, scribes, and even Judas, but we trust that, when we confess our sin, You are faithful and just to forgive us of our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And in response, we worship You, pouring everything we have out at Your feet in praise and abandon.



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Tuesday, March 27 | Mark 14:12-21 | Amy Jackson

I have to admit that I can be sentimental; certain dates often stick out to me. I've looked back on 2017 with joy as I prepare for marriage: my first date with my fiancé, Matt, happened on February 7, a month before my thirtieth birthday. Matt proposed on October 28 (his grandparents' wedding anniversary), and we'll get married six months from that day (on April 28, 2018). I like to think that these dates aren't just arbitrary; rather, they've been specifically appointed by the Lord.

As we continue our readings for Holy Week, I can't help but notice how our dates for Easter are intertwined with the dates for Passover. Passover was the observance of the Lord's deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt. It commemorated the night that God's people were spared from death by the blood of the lamb marking their door frames. Each spring, the Israelites would journey to Jerusalem to observe Passover, remembering what God had done for their ancestors in Egypt.

It wasn't a coincidence that, right before Christ was crucified, He celebrated the Passover with His disciples. Everything, down to the date of Christ's crucifixion, has been ordained by the hand of God. Even the way that the room is provided seems mysterious—while it's possible that Jesus could have arranged this room earlier with other friends in the city, it seems to me like God's divine fingerprints are all over everything about this dinner (Mark 14:12-16). There's even fulfillment of a psalm (Psalm 41:9) as Judas and Jesus both dip their bread into the dish. What's more, as we read about Judas's betrayal, notice the phrasing Christ chooses to use: "For the Son of Man goes as it is written of Him" (Mark 14:21). For God, there was never a Plan B. The cross was always the only plan. The Old Testament prophets foretold His death, and every part of this Passover meal was pointing forward to the next fateful day, when the true Passover Lamb would be slaughtered, once and for all, for the sins of mankind—past, present, and future.

And yet we see that Judas is no puppet with his hands tied behind his back, unable to keep himself from such treason. Earlier in Mark 14, we saw Judas turn on Jesus and go to the chief priests to betray Him (Mark 14:10). Jesus confirms the role of human responsibility here with the end of verse 21: "but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!" God's plan, before the beginning of time, was that Christ would die on that cross that day. And yet Judas would still be held responsible for his actions. Does God work in the midst of our human fallenness and sin? Absolutely! Does He faithfully forgive those who confess their sin (1 John 1:9) and desire that we repent and turn from evil? Of course! But often we must still face the consequences of our sin. God's heart desires that we would choose good and not evil, and yet He still works in the midst of our broken choices. We hold both of these truths in tension—the sovereignty of God and our own human responsibility.

Lord, we believe that You are in control over every aspect of our lives! We also believe that You desire that we choose good over evil. Help us to trust in Your divine plan and to yield control of our lives to You, believing that You know best for us. When we are tempted, give us the grace to flee from sin and to run to You.



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Wednesday, March 28 | Mark 14:22-31 | Amy Jackson

I got a flu shot back in October. Recently, I started to feel pretty lethargic. I was certain that I just needed more sleep, but it turned out that I actually had the flu. Now, I was pretty cautious and tried to wash my hands, avoid people who were sick, and take lots of vitamin C during flu season—but apparently my immune system was weaker than I imagined, and even with a flu shot, it was no match for this year's virus.

In today's passage, we read about Christ's prediction that the disciples will all fall away, a prophecy fulfilled from Zechariah 13:7. As the disciples and Christ left the upper room and walked down to the Mount of Olives, Jesus warned them of their abandonment. But Peter would have none of it and proclaimed that, even if the others left, he would stay with Christ until the very end! Peter and I have something in common: our flesh is weaker than we'd like to admit. We want to think that we have it all together and that we can avoid sin in our own power...but it's just not possible, is it? I'm sure none of the disciples got up that morning planning to deny Christ. In fact, I would even guess that Judas himself didn't join the group with intentions to betray Jesus. But sin seeps in slowly and, often, we are unaware of just how disobedient and broken we really are.

The good news is that Jesus came for sinners. Even in this passage, as Christ predicted their betrayal, He offered them the good news that He would go before them to Galilee after His resurrection (Mark 14:28). Though the sheep might scatter, the Good Shepherd would never abandon them. And this forgiveness that Christ offers is only made possible by His sacrifice on the cross, foreshadowed in verses 22-25. Because His body was broken and His blood was shed and given for us, there is hope of restoration for "the vilest sinner who truly believes"—including you and me.

Father, thank You for the hope we have in You! We confess that we are more sinful than we can even imagine. We are broken people and our hearts are prone to wander. We come to You, grateful for the forgiveness You offer through the blood of Jesus. Thank You for never leaving and never forsaking us.

Thursday, March 29 | Mark 14:32-72 | Amy Jackson

Today is Maundy Thursday. If you're like me and didn't grow up at MBBC or in a liturgical church, you may wonder what that means. "Maundy" comes from Latin "*mandatum*" and references the commandment that Christ gave on the night He was betrayed—to love one another just as He has loved us (John 13:34-35). In John's gospel, Christ gave this commandment after washing the disciples' feet. While Mark does not include this act of self-humiliating love in his gospel, I think Christ's prayer in the garden, found in today's reading, likewise shows us the astonishing depths of His love.

In this haunting scene, we see Jesus go out to the Garden of Gethsemane, a garden near the olive groves on the Mount of Olives. While He prays alone, the three disciples who swore they would never forsake Him fall asleep by His side. Another disciple has already made preparations to betray Christ. And there, abandoned by those He loved, we see Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, lying prostrate on the ground as He



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experiences the soul-crushing weight of anguish anticipating His death, pleading for the Father to allow this hour to pass from Him.

If you know the rest of the story, you know that, while Christ faced death, He was also raised to life. I think sometimes we allow that to “sanitize” the rest of the story. Even in His omniscience, even in knowing that the Father could raise Him from the dead, we see Jesus here experiencing the anguish we all feel as we look into the face of death. It’s a magnificent picture of Christ’s humanity and of His sacrificial love—that, knowing the road ahead, He chose to submit to the Father’s will. And, it’s a moment of identification. When we feel the sting and the sorrow of death, we are encouraged that we are not alone. Others may not know what to say in times of grief, just as the disciples fell asleep while on watch rather than praying—but we are comforted with the truth that Christ knows. That He knows what it means to be “sorrowful to the point of death” and to be deeply distressed. And that, because of His resurrection, we are promised that death, the last enemy, will one day be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26) and that we too will be raised to life (1 Corinthians 15:50-58).

Lord, thank You for the hope we have in the face of death, through the One who defeated death. We are grateful that You put on skin and identify with us in every sorrow. You know what it is like to grieve. You know what it is like to face death. What a testimony of Your true love for us! And because we know You, we trust that, one day, we will also know what it is like to be raised to life.

Friday, March 30 | Mark 15:1-41 | Amy Jackson

In church history, today is known as Good Friday, the day which marks Christ’s crucifixion. We’ve arranged this reading plan so that you would be reading Mark’s account of the crucifixion on Good Friday as part of your daily Bible reading. You may have read the account of the crucifixion a number of times, but one thing I find is that, each time I read Scripture, the Lord works to open my heart and show me something new about His living, God-breathed Word.

As I read today’s passage, I was overcome thinking about the many ways that Christ fulfilled the prophecy of the suffering servant long foretold in Isaiah 53. As Christ was delivered to Pilate, He remained silent. He had every right to defend Himself, but He was silent—just like the lamb before his shearers (Isaiah 53:7). And while Jesus had never instilled rebellion against Rome, when the people were offered the release of a prisoner, they chose the insurrectionist Barabbas rather than Christ. Barabbas was guilty of the very crime that Jesus was falsely accused of—and Christ took Barabbas’s place on the cross, nailed between two thieves who were likely also rebels. His grave was made with the wicked, “although He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in His mouth” (Isaiah 53:9).

When I’ve read this account in the past, I’ve gotten so frustrated at the inequity we see. Why do the people want to see a condemned criminal released, rather than the sinless Son of God? I believe this exchange was divinely orchestrated, because in some ways, we are all Barabbas, aren’t we? We may not be political insurrectionists, but we are sinners who stand guilty, condemned to die because of our sin. Christ took the



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penalty for our sin freely and fully. When we deserved to die, He took our place. Christ “was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities, [and] upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace” (Isaiah 53:5). Allow this truth to sink deep down in your soul today as you meditate on the death of Christ and bring you to a place of worship and thanksgiving. Because of His death, we have peace with God. Because of His death, sin and death no longer have the final word. Because of His death, we have hope everlasting.

Lord, we praise You for the grace You have shown us—that You loved us until the very end, that You “bore the sins of many and make intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12), and that, with Your wounds, we are healed.

Saturday, March 31 | Mark 15:42-47 | Amy Jackson

Today is regarded as Holy Saturday by many liturgical traditions, a day meant for deep reflection on Christ’s death. Although Mark does not tell us what happened on that Saturday, I think this passage about Christ’s burial is actually really appropriate to set the mood for what Christ’s followers were probably experiencing. The man they trusted in, who declared that He was the Messiah, the One they had hoped would deliver them from Rome, died the death of a criminal. His body was flogged and beaten before enduring the horrifying pain of crucifixion. Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the blood-drenched body of Christ, so that it might be washed and prepared for burial before the Sabbath began at sundown. The very Word of God was dead and placed inside of a stone-cut tomb.

The gospel of Matthew tells us that, on that Saturday, a group of soldiers were sent to guard the tomb, lest the disciples steal Jesus’ body and claim that He had come back to life (Matthew 27:62-66). Luke tells us that Joseph and the women who prepared Jesus’ body for burial observed Sabbath rest “according to the commandment” that day (Luke 23:52). But I doubt that it was restorative rest. If you’ve experienced the death of a loved one, you know that the days to follow are filled with different kinds of grief. Perhaps some of Christ’s followers simply felt numb, in total shock. Some may have tried to continue their usual rhythms in a haze, trying to maintain some sense of normalcy. Perhaps others wept openly, as if their hope had died. In many ways, their Hope **had** died.

We like to skip over this day, don’t we? It’s much easier to move straight from the cross to the empty tomb. Christ indeed has been victorious over the grave, and we will have much to celebrate tomorrow morning when Easter dawns. Our Hope was raised to life, and because of His resurrection, we have every hope in the world that we too will be raised and that death will be defeated. But many days, it feels like we’re living in Holy Saturday too, doesn’t it? Our bodies wear out and break, and people we love die, and there is so much suffering on this side of eternity. In the midst of life’s sorrow, we look to the resurrection with eager longing.

Lord, we thank You that Death does not have the last word—that one day, we too will experience the same kind of resurrection You experienced that Easter Sunday. Thank you for meeting us in the brokenness of every Holy Saturday in our lives, and for reminding us of the eternal hope we have in You.



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Sunday, April 1 | Mark 16 | Amy Jackson

What is a witness? Merriam-Webster's website provides several helpful definitions for the word including "one that gives evidence" and "one who has personal knowledge of something." Of course, there's also the legal definition of a witness as "one who testifies in a cause or before a judicial tribunal."

Mark 16 introduces us to the witnesses of the resurrection. We see these three women—Mary Magdalene, Mary (the mother of James), and Salome—venture out early on Sunday morning to anoint the body of Christ, their final act of loving devotion to their Master. Can you imagine the surprise and shock they felt when they arrived at the tomb and found that the stone (which had concerned them in verse 3) was rolled away? What must have gone through their heads? They might have believed that someone had snuck in to maliciously steal Christ's body.

Thankfully, the women were not alone at the tomb. An angel was there at the tomb, described by Mark as having the appearance of a young man in a white robe. This messenger declared to them that Christ's body was not there because He had been raised to life. No human eye was witness to the resurrection firsthand. Only the angels in heaven saw when God Himself raised Christ to life. And the stone wasn't rolled away to make the resurrection possible; it was rolled away as evidence of the resurrection that had already happened, as a witness to these women.

It's interesting that these women were witnesses to so much at the end of Mark's gospel: they were the ones who witnessed Christ's death, they were present for His burial, and here they are as the first human witnesses to the resurrection. In fact, all four gospels attest that women were the first on the scene that Sunday morning, which gives us even more proof for the validity of the resurrection and the veracity of the gospels. In the Greco-Roman court of law in the first-century, women's testimonies were ineligible. Can you imagine the gospel writers including this detail had it really not happened this way?

Their story in Mark ends abruptly,² but other gospels tell us that these women, as witnesses to the good news of Christ's resurrection, responded by telling others. In many ways, the gospel of Mark leaves the news open-ended to us as readers—because we too are witnesses. It is as if Mark is saying, "Now that you have heard the good news, what shall you do with it?"

God, we praise You for the hope we have because Christ was raised to life! We thank You for the opportunity to share this news—the best news of all—with a world broken by sin and enslaved to death. Empower us, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to be faithful witnesses to the hope of the resurrection wherever You may send us, even to the ends of the earth.

² The gospel of Mark has quite an interesting ending! If you'd like to read more from biblical scholars about how to interpret the end of Mark's gospel, I would recommend James A. Brooks's Mark commentary in the New American Commentary series, or Walter Wessel and Mark Strauss's commentary on Mark in the Expositor's Bible Commentary series. Both commentaries are available in our church library.