

## IVP GOSPEL OF MARK

**1:1.** The Greek term translated “gospel” refers to the good news a herald would bring, and the Greek translation of Isaiah used the related verb to refer to the good news that God was restoring his people and bringing the kingdom of God. (Because Jewish readers often named books for their first word or words, some scholars suggest that “the good news of Jesus Christ” is the title of Mark’s Gospel; but these words are also simply a natural way to start off a book like this one.)

**1:2–3.** Jewish teachers often combined several texts or parts of texts, especially if they had a key word or words in common (here, “prepare the way”). Because they were so learned in the Scriptures, they did not have to say which texts they were quoting and often assumed the context without quoting it. Thus Mark cites both Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1) here, although he mentions only Isaiah. Isaiah refers to preparing the way for God, who is coming to restore his people; Malachi refers to God coming in judgment to set matters straight among his people. Mark applies these texts about God to Jesus.

**1:4–5.** Like many other ancient peoples, Jewish people practiced ceremonial washings. Their only once-for-all ceremonial washing, however, was the immersion that non-Jews had to go through when they converted to Judaism. Non-Jews who were converting to Judaism would immerse themselves in water, probably under the supervision of a religious expert. John’s baptizing activity fits this model.

Jewish people also practiced “repentance” when they did something wrong, asking God’s forgiveness and determining to change. (The Old Testament prophets often used this Hebrew idea of “turning” from sin; it involves more than just a “change of mind,” which is the literal sense of the Greek term used here.) But the ultimate example of repenting, or turning from a wrong way of living to a right way of living, was when a non-Jew decided to obey the teachings of Israel’s God.

To tell Jewish people that they had to be baptized or repent the same way non-Jews did would have been offensive, because it challenged the prevalent Jewish belief about salvation. Most Jewish people thought that if they were born into a Jewish family and did not reject God’s law, they would be saved; John told them instead that they had to come to God the same way that non-Jews did. The point of John’s baptism is that everyone has to come to God on the same terms.

The Jordan River was the most natural place for John to have the people immerse themselves, but this location may have also evoked Israel’s history of salvation (Josh 3–4). John’s coming in the “wilderness” could evoke Israel’s history, too, especially because Isaiah 40:3 predicted the herald of a new exodus there, and many Jewish people expected the Messiah to come as a new Moses there.

**1:6.** Some other poor people in John’s day dressed the way he did and ate locusts and honey (the Dead Sea Scrolls even give directions concerning the eating of locusts). But what is most important here is that the Old Testament emphasizes that Elijah dressed this way and, like John, did not depend on society for his sustenance (cf. 1 Kings 17:4, 9). Elijah was expected to return before the end (Mal 3:1; 4:5–6).

Many Jewish people believed that there had been no true prophets since Malachi and that prophets would not be restored till near the time of the end. But Mark wants us to understand that John is definitely a prophet.

**1:7.** Disciples often served their teachers in the same ways that slaves would serve their masters, except for the most menial chores like taking off their masters’ sandals. John feels unworthy even to be the Messiah’s slave.

**1:8.** Some passages in the Old Testament speak of the Spirit being poured out like water. These passages refer especially to the time of God’s kingdom, when he would cleanse his people and endow them with power to speak for him (Is 44:3; Ezek 36:25–27; Joel 2:28–29). Jewish tradition in Jesus’ day still stressed that the Spirit would cleanse and provide prophetic anointing in the end time.

**1:9–10.** The tearing of the heavens may also indicate that the kingdom is near (Is 64:1; 65:17). Although ancient writers used the dove symbolically in many diverse ways, it may here allude back to God’s promise of a new world (Gen 8:10–12).

**1:11.** Jewish teachers who believed that God no longer spoke through prophets believed that he now spoke to them by means of a voice from heaven (*bat kol*), although this was not considered as important as prophecy. Here Mark shows that both a voice from heaven *and* John’s prophecy testify to Jesus.

In Jewish stories the voice from heaven occasionally quoted Scripture, and most scholars think that the voice here refers to two or three Scriptures: Psalm 2:7, about the royal Messiah, the Son of God; Isaiah 42:1, about the suffering servant; and Genesis 22:2, about Abraham sacrificing his beloved son. The wording of Mark's text is closest to Psalm 2:7 and Genesis 22:2.

**1:12–13.** It was commonly believed that demons were especially attracted to places like bathhouses, graveyards and deserts. Readers would thus sense the suspense as Jesus battled with Satan on Satan's own turf. Safety among beasts signified God's protection (Ezek 34:25; Dan 6:22).

**1:14–15.** The summary of Jesus' message may also be the summary of Mark's Gospel, or good news (1:1): people should turn their lives over to God (on repentance, see comment on 1:4–5) if they believe the good news that God is getting ready to fulfill all his promises to his people.

The Jewish people recognized that God ruled the universe in one sense now, but they prayed daily for the day when his kingdom, or rule, would be established over all peoples of the earth. Then, they believed, everyone would submit to God. Because the Gospels affirm that Jesus must come twice, they recognize that the kingdom comes in two stages: God's future rule is established in the lives of those who obey him in the present, and over all the world when Jesus returns. John, however, was not yet in a position to make this distinction.

### **1:16–20**

#### **Downward Mobility and Jesus' Call**

Ancient writers often liked to illustrate their teachings with examples, and Mark is no exception. After telling how Jesus summoned people to turn their lives over to God, he reports a particular example illustrating how some followers of Jesus did so.

A few people in Jewish Palestine were rich; most were relatively poor. Some, like fishermen, tended to fall between the rich and the poor (distinctions were less clearly drawn in Galilee than in much of the empire). James and John were clearly not poor—they had “hired servants” (v. 20), as only well-off people did (although the term could mean rented slaves, it most likely means free hired workers). Peter and Andrew were probably in business with James and John (Lk 5:7–10); we know of other fishing partnerships at that time. This text indicates that none of these disciples left their business behind because it was going badly; they left behind well-paying jobs.

Many Jewish teachers in Jesus' day felt that the greatest commandment was to honor one's parents. To abruptly leave behind one's family and the family business was a great sacrifice that went against everything the culture taught.

Disciples usually sought out their own teachers. Because discipleship often involved temporarily laying aside one's livelihood and being apart from one's wife and children, the decision to choose a teacher would have normally been made only after much deliberation, especially when the teacher traveled from place to place instead of staying in one town to teach.

### **1:21–28**

#### **Authority over Demons**

The account of the fishermen demonstrates the claims Jesus' authority makes on his followers' lives, but the verses that follow it demonstrate his authority over evil spirits (cf. 1:12–13). The only recorded exorcist in the Old Testament was David (1 Sam 16:23). Although wandering demons appear frequently in Jewish literature, the only demons that appear in the Gospels (except Satan – Mk 1:13) are in people they possess (or, as a second choice, in pigs – 5:12). The place that Jesus encounters his first demon may shock Mark's readers: it is in a religious institution.

**1:21.** Most synagogues were community centers and places of prayer and study. When visiting teachers were present, synagogue leaders would invite them to lecture, especially on the sabbath. Archaeologists have found the site of Capernaum's synagogue, which was built from basalt blocks. Although later synagogues were more ornate, most people in this first-century Galilean synagogue probably sat on mats on the floor.

**1:22.** Synagogue services were conducted by priests or by what we would call “lay leaders,” but those most skilled in the Scriptures undoubtedly contributed their share when the Old Testament was to be expounded. Many local teachers were village scribes who also wrote down and interpreted legal documents for their village; some of them taught children the Bible. Most teachers would try to expound the law (normally from their Scripture reading) by explaining the

proper way to translate and apply it or by appealing to their traditions. Jesus' teaching went quite a bit further than this kind of exposition.

**1:23–24.** Demons (also sometimes called “unclean spirits,” e.g., Jubilees 10:1) were often associated with magic, and magicians tried to subdue other spiritual forces by invoking their names. If the demon here is trying to subdue Jesus in this way (“I know who you are” was used to subdue spiritual powers in magical texts), as some scholars have suggested, this ploy does not work. Ancients often recognized that demons had access to supernatural knowledge; it is not surprising that these demons perceive Jesus' true identity, which the people there still do not recognize. “Holy One” was normally a title of God, but “Holy One of God” here probably means something like “God's right-hand agent”; in Jewish literature, demons recognized their inability to harm those who walked close to God.

**1:25–27.** Demons were rebuked and subdued with orders like “Be silent” (Testament of Solomon); rebukes in the New Testament and other ancient literature never involved a *formal* statement like “I rebuke you.” Exiting demons usually caused a commotion to make clear that they were leaving, regardless of the person who was casting them out.

Although exorcists—people who tried to chase demons out of other people—also occasionally used phrases like “Come out of so-and-so!” they used the phrases as parts of elaborate magical incantations. They had two main methods of expelling demons: (1) revolting or scaring the demon out (e.g., by putting a smelly root up the possessed person's nose in the hope that the demon would not be able to stand it); (2) invoking the name of a higher spirit to get rid of the lower one. The people are thus amazed that Jesus can be effective by simply ordering the demons to leave. Jewish tradition praised teachers who could draw special insights from the law and sometimes attributed miracle-working powers to popular teachers; but Jesus seems to earn a category by himself (“new teaching”).

**1:28.** Galilee's villages were close together, and close connections among them would allow word to spread rapidly.

#### **1:29–34**

##### **The Healer's Popularity**

**1:29–31.** A newly married couple normally lived with the husband's family until they made enough money to move out on their own. Many parents died while their children were young adults, so it is possible that Simon and Andrew took over their parents' home. Simon's father-in-law had probably passed away, and Simon and his wife had taken her widowed mother into their home. Caring for one's extended family was more common then than it is today.

**1:32–34.** The sabbath ended Saturday at sundown. Mark mentions that it was “after sunset” to let us know that the sabbath is over, because it would have violated the sabbath for anyone to have carried someone on the sabbath. The whole town gathers “at the door” because most homes around Capernaum had only one room, and even a larger home could not have accommodated many people. The doorway may have opened to the street or to a courtyard shared with other homes, as often in Galilean towns. Teachers reputed to work miracles rapidly drew large crowds.

#### **1:35–39**

##### **Prayer Alone**

**1:35–37.** This crowdedness also leads to another problem: it would be nearly impossible to find a place to be alone in such ancient towns, with their narrow streets and sometimes ten or twenty people living in the common one-room houses; most town blocks consisted of four homes all facing a common courtyard. Galilee was also heavily populated, and villages were commonly close together. But one could find a place alone in the hills outside one's village if one arose early enough. People got up for work as soon as the sun rose, so Jesus has to get up well before dawn to go out and find a solitary place for prayer.

**1:38–39.** The word used for the other “towns” suggests large agricultural towns still governed according to regular village structures; these were apparently places that had not yet heard of Jesus. He probably could have drawn the largest crowds in the synagogues on market days and sabbaths, and in late afternoons or early evenings when laborers had finished their day's work.

#### **1:40–45**

##### **Cleansing a Leper**

Leprosy was an unattractive skin disease for which the Bible had prescribed quarantine from the rest of society (Lev 13:45–46), although the Bible did not go as far as many Jewish teachers who blamed the disease on the leper's sin (often the sin of slander). Lepers were thus outcasts from the rest of society, the kind of people most healthy people preferred to ignore. Touching a leper was forbidden, and most people would have been revolted by the thought of it.

The leper approaches Jesus with humility, which was the proper Old Testament way to approach God for prayer, although the fact that he even approaches Jesus also indicates a measure of holy boldness. Acknowledging that God had the right to refuse the prayer and that one depended on his mercy was not in any way a lack of faith (Gen 18:27, 30–32; 2 Sam 10:12; Dan 3:18).

The law had prescribed particular sacrifices if someone's leprosy were cured (Lev 14:1–32). By complying with these regulations, Jesus does nothing to violate the law or to offend the priests. (Later Jewish laws also insisted that the leper be checked by a local priest before going to the temple, but it is not clear whether these prescriptions were in effect in Jesus' day.) Teachers thought to perform miracles usually had large followings, because many people were sick; the number of people suffering from various afflictions is attested by how many people flocked to hot springs in Galilee that were thought to relieve ailments. Jesus, who performs miracles without the common pagan use of magical incantations, acquires such a large following that for a period of time he cannot accommodate them inside a town (v. 45).

## **2:1–12** **Healed and Forgiven**

Just as Jesus violates his culture's religious sensibilities by touching a leper (1:41) and claims more authority than a normal rabbi would dare accept (cf. 1:17, 27), and just as Mark's narrative challenges cultural religion by beginning with a demoniac in a house of study and prayer (1:21–28), Jesus' role in this passage challenges the theological categories of his culture's religious establishment.

**2:1–2.** The capacity of the average Capernaum home may have allowed only about fifty persons standing close together (the longest span in excavated homes is eighteen feet). We thus should not think of literally the whole town inside or just outside the door.

**2:3–4.** Many "beds" were mats; thus the paralytics' friends may have carried him on the bed on which he lay all the time. The roof was approached by an outside staircase, so they could reach it unimpeded. The roof of single-story homes was sturdy enough for walking but was normally made of branches and rushes laid over the roof's beams and covered with dried mud; thus one could dig through it.

**2:5–7.** Sins were to be atoned for by offerings in the temple. Judaism taught that only God could forgive sins, but most Jews allowed that some of God's representatives could speak on God's behalf. The passive form, "are forgiven," could be interpreted in this way (Jewish teachers often used the passive form to describe God's activity); but Jesus was not a priest, no one had offered sacrifice, and the scribes had heard no basis for the pronouncement of forgiveness, not even clear indication of repentance.

The Old Testament penalty for blaspheming God's name—reproaching rather than honoring it—was death (Lev 24:10–23). According to subsequent Jewish teaching, blasphemy involved pronouncing the divine name or inviting people to follow other gods. Strictly speaking, therefore, these legal scholars would have been mistaken in interpreting Jesus' words as blasphemy, even by their own rules. But the term was used much more broadly in popular parlance in this period, and they may apply it in the general sense of dishonoring the divine name.

**2:8.** Because supernatural knowledge was especially attributed to prophets (e.g., 2 Kings 6:12), Jesus' hearers would probably view him here as a prophet; "speaking in one's heart" may be idiomatic (Deut 15:9; 18:21; 30:14). Most Jewish teachers believed that "prophets" in the Old Testament sense had ceased, but most of the people were happy to entertain new prophetic figures, many of whom they saw as harbingers of the end.

**2:9–12.** Some Jewish teachers accepted miracles as verification that a teacher was truly God's representative; others did not regard miracles as sufficient proof if they disagreed with the teacher's interpretation of Scripture.

Jewish teachers knew that only God could ultimately forgive (on the Day of Atonement in response to sacrifice); but they also recognized that healing ultimately came from God. Both were from God but could be announced through God's agents acting according to his will. Josephus shows us that many false prophets in Jesus' day claimed to work miracles but actually

failed to work them; some of Jesus' critics may have placed him in this category. His act in front of these witnesses, however, should have challenged them to rethink their case.

## **2:13–17**

### **A Tax Gatherer Follows**

As in 2:1–12, Jesus' behavior here runs counter to standards of piety among his Jewish contemporaries.

**2:13.** Most prominent local teachers taught regular groups of disciples and also performed other local services in their town. Translocal teachers who had large followings, however, could threaten the establishment as potential revolutionaries.

**2:14.** Levi may have been a general tax farmer working for Herod Antipas; situated at an office in Capernaum, however, he was more likely a customs agent, charging import duties on wares brought through this town on important nearby trade routes. Even more than the fishermen, he has a secure and prosperous job, which he abandons to follow Jesus' call.

Some taxes went directly to the Roman government, but tolls and customs taxes (usually levied at 2–3 percent, but multiplied for traders who passed through many territories) supported the cities where they were taken. Even if Levi is a locally valuable customs agent, however, this narrative shows that he is still regarded as unwholesome; the municipal aristocracy supported Roman interests against those of the Jewish poor.

**2:15.** Tax gatherers were regarded as collaborators with the Romans and despised by religious people. Some commentators have argued that “sinners” may refer specifically to those who did not eat food in ritual purity, but the term probably refers to anyone who lived sinfully rather than religiously, as if they did not care what the religious community thought of them.

**2:16.** Table fellowship indicated intimate relations among those who shared it. The Pharisees were particularly scrupulous about their special rules on eating and did not like to eat with less scrupulous people, especially people like tax gatherers and sinners. Here they assume that Jesus, being a wise teacher, ought to share their religious convictions.

**2:17.** Jesus' reply plays on a common image of the day (comparing physicians and teachers) to make his point.

## **2:18–22**

### **The Right Time to Fast**

Again (see 2:13–17) Jesus does not appear religious enough for the traditionalists; but he has a new kind of religious lifestyle in mind.

**2:18.** The Law required fasting only on the Day of Atonement, but many other fasts had been added by religious Jews, especially by groups like the Pharisees (many of whom may have fasted without water twice a week, especially in the dry season). Fasting was an important practice to join with prayer or penitence, so it would have been unusual for disciples (prospective rabbis) to have avoided it altogether. A teacher was regarded as responsible for the behavior of his disciples.

**2:19–20.** Wedding feasts required seven days of festivity; one was not permitted to fast or engage in other acts of mourning or difficult labor during a wedding feast. Here Jesus makes an analogy about the similar inappropriateness of fasting in his own time.

**2:21–22.** Again the issue is the inappropriateness of fasting in the present circumstance. Jesus uses two ordinary facts to make his point. Older clothes had already shrunk somewhat from washing. Wine could be kept in either jars or wineskins; the latter would stretch. Old wineskins had already been stretched to capacity by fermenting wine within them; if they were then filled with unfermented wine, it would also expand, and the old wineskins, already stretched to the limit, would break.

## **2:23–27**

### **The Right Use of the Sabbath**

Jesus' conflicts with the religious establishment in the preceding passages come to a head over details of sabbath observance (2:23–3:6). Their religious priorities differ; whereas the religious establishment may think that Jesus questions the Bible's authority, he demands instead a different way to understand it and so apply it.

**2:23–24.** Because not many Pharisees lived in Galilee and they would normally not be in a grainfield on the sabbath—unless they were following Jesus around—it is possible that local

religious teachers are responding to reports about what Jesus' disciples had done, and that Mark applies the more specific term *Pharisees* to them. (Like other ancient writers, Mark was free to update older wording and to omit details irrelevant to the point of his narrative.) It is also possible that Pharisees had been investigating or traveling with Jesus.

Pharisees would not have been more than a sabbath day's journey from a village where they were staying; thus the disciples, who encounter Pharisees, are surely within walking distance of food in a village, if it had been properly prepared the preceding day. Teachers were held responsible for the behavior of their disciples, and many rabbis considered it proper to defend the honor of their disciples.

**2:25.** Whether or not his opponents agree with Jesus' argument, he has cited biblical precedent for hunger overriding a standard biblical rule; therefore they could not punish him in a local priestly court. Because Jesus is defending his disciples, he mentions "those who were with" David; although it is not clear that anyone was with David (1 Sam 21:1), David claimed that there were others (21:2). Either Jesus accepts David's claim as true, or his point from the standpoint of legal precedent is that the priest accepted David's word and let hunger take precedence over ritual law.

**2:26.** Abiathar was not yet high priest when David was given the bread, but Mark employs the term in the standard manner of his day: "high priest" was applied to any member of the high priestly family with administrative power, which would have included Abiathar when David came to Ahimelech, Abiathar's father.

**2:27.** Although Jesus claims the right to interpret sabbath rules as the authoritative Son of Man (Dan 7:13-14), his opponents no doubt understand him to mean that because the sabbath was made for people (other Jewish teachers also mentioned this point), human beings had authority to do what they needed on the sabbath. ("Son of man" was a standard Aramaic term for "human being," and his hearers probably assumed he meant this rather than that he claimed to be the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13-14.)

### **3:1-6**

#### **Healing or Killing on the Sabbath**

**3:1.** The muscles and nerves of a "dried" or "withered" hand were inactive; thus the hand, smaller than usual, did not function (1 Kings 13:4; cf. Testament of Simeon 2:12). No cure was known for this paralysis.

**3:2.** In the teachings of Jewish legal scholars, minor cures were not permitted on the sabbath, although saving a life was a different matter. (Even the strictest observers of the sabbath allowed compromising the sabbath to save life or to fight in a defensive war.) The rule against cures applied to physicians, however, not to healings wrought by God, and Pharisees disputed among themselves whether prayer for the sick was permitted on the sabbath. Jesus' opponents are therefore going considerably beyond standard Jewish rules to try to convict him.

**3:3-5.** Jesus might mean that "killing" is permitted on the sabbath, as it was during the Maccabean warfare (second century B.C.); more likely he draws a legal analogy from the principle that one could violate the sabbath to save life but not to kill except in self-defense; by extension, one could do good but not harm. (A possible allusion to 2 Kings 5:7 is less likely.)

**3:6.** Unintentional violations of the sabbath or issues of disagreement about what constituted work (matters that were debatable in Jewish courts) were normally treated lightly; capital punishment (Ex 31:14; 35:2) was thought appropriate only for those who willfully rejected the sabbath. Jesus' opponents go far beyond their own traditional teachings here. On the Herodians see comment on 12:13.

### **3:7-12**

#### **Increasing Popularity**

**3:7-8.** Idumea was south of Galilee; east of the Jordan River was Perea, and Tyre and Sidon were to the northwest. Like Galilee, Idumea and Perea were religiously Jewish territories once dominated by Gentiles; Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities, although it seems most likely here that Jewish residents of those cities are intended (see 7:27).

**3:9-12.** Finally Jesus has to find another way to deal with the growing crowds (3:9). Any prophet supposed to perform signs drew large crowds in Jewish Palestine, and Jesus seems to have drawn larger crowds than most others. Other "signs prophets" sometimes tried miracles like making the walls of Jerusalem fall down or the Jordan part (they failed), but no prophets since Elijah and Elisha had been reported as doing as many healing miracles as Jesus.

### 3:13–19

#### Commissioning Twelve Representatives

**3:13.** Mountains were often places for communion with God (e.g., the experiences of Moses and Elijah).

**3:14–15.** Israel consisted of twelve tribes, and if groups chose twelve leaders (as apparently those who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls did), they did so because they believed that their own group was the true, obedient remnant of Israel. “Apostles” means commissioned representatives, the point here being that Jesus’ authority to proclaim the kingdom and expel demons continues through his followers.

**3:16–19.** Luke (and probably “Q,” a source he shares with Matthew) lists “Judas son of James” rather than Matthew’s and Mark’s “Thaddeus.” Ancient business documents show that people were commonly known by several different names, so the different lists of apostles probably do refer to the same people. (The differences in the lists do show that the lists were not copied from one another or standardized, and thus that the tradition of Jesus choosing twelve is older than the particular lists themselves.) Nicknames were common, appearing even on tomb inscriptions.

“Cananaean” is Aramaic for “zealot” (Luke 6:15); thus some translations simply read “Simon the Zealot” here. In this period, this term could just mean “zealous one,” but it may mean that he had been involved in revolutionary activity (some revolutionaries soon after this time came to be known as “Zealots”). “Boanerges” is a Greek rendering of the Aramaic for “sons of thunder” (*rgs* for Aramaic *r’m*). “Iscaiot” may mean “man from Kerioth,” but this is unclear; other proposals (e.g., a Greek transliteration of an Aramaic corruption of the Latin *sicarius*, “assassin”; see comment on Acts 21:38) are equally uncertain.

### 3:20–30

#### Jesus Raids Satan’s House

**3:20–22.** Exorcists often invoked a higher spirit to get rid of a lower one, so Jesus’ opponents accuse him of gaining his power for exorcism from sorcery—relying on Satan himself. Insanity (3:21) was often associated with demon possession (3:22). Because false teachers were sometimes thought to be inspired by demons and the official penalty for misleading God’s people this way was death (Deut 13:5; 18:20), Jesus’ family had reason to want to reach him before the legal experts did. (The legal experts could not enforce the death penalty, because Palestine was under Roman domination; but the public charge alone would humiliate the family.) Teachers offended by reports of the events of 2:1–3:6 are now taking the offensive.

**3:23–27.** Although magical texts sometimes “bind” demons by incantations, Jesus has defeated the strong man simply by his moral victory in the wilderness (1:13) and by commanding demons to leave (1:25–26; cf. Is 49:24–25).

**3:28–30.** “Blaspheming the Spirit” here means opposing Jesus’ messiahship so firmly that one resorts to accusations of sorcery to get around the Spirit’s signs confirming his identity. Different teachers debated whether some sins were eternally unforgivable; Jesus probably means that their hearts were becoming so hard they would never think to repent.

### 3:31–34

#### Jesus’ Real Family

Thinking of one’s coreligionists as brothers and sisters was common; respecting older persons as mothers or fathers was also widespread. But allowing ties in the religious community to take precedence over family ties was unheard-of in Judaism, except when a pagan converted to Judaism and regarded his new family as more important than his old one. (Like other Jewish teachers, Jesus commonly employs hyperbole, or rhetorical exaggeration. He is not rejecting his earthly family altogether but stating his priorities, because they want to declare him mentally incompetent to rescue him from the dangers he is sure to face from religious authorities if he continues on his present path; see 3:21.)

### 4:1–20

#### The Parable of the Sower and Four Soils

**4:1–2.** The acoustic setting from the boat would have been ideal for Jesus’ voice to carry to the

crowds. Some places in Palestine, such as a cove near Capernaum, have natural acoustics that would allow as many as seven thousand people to hear a person speaking in the center of the cove.

Rabbis commonly taught in parables; although the subjects of many parables centered on royal courts, teachers explaining points to common folk probably often used more down-to-earth parables like the harvest stories Jesus uses here.

**4:3–7.** When seed was sown before the ground was plowed up (as it often was), it commonly befell one of the fates reported here. The “road” is probably the footpath through the field.

**4:8.** Thirtyfold, sixtyfold and a hundredfold are tremendously good harvests from Galilean soil. The fertile Jordan Valley normally yielded between ten– and a hundredfold, so a hundredfold need not be a miraculous harvest, as some have thought; but for much of Palestine, the average yield was tenfold (meaning that ten seeds were harvested for every seed sown), and all the figures Jesus reports here are very good yields. The yield is worth the sown seed that was wasted (cf. Eccles 11:1–6).

**4:9.** “Ears to hear” reflects the motif in the Old Testament prophets that many had ears but were deaf to God’s voice (e.g., Is 6:10; 43:8; 44:18; Ezek 12:2).

**4:10–11.** Jewish teachers normally used parables to illustrate and explain points, not to conceal them. But if one tells stories without stating the point they were meant to illustrate, as Jesus does here, only those who listen most astutely (4:9) and start with insiders’ knowledge could possibly figure out one’s point. The members of the Qumran community believed that God gave secrets to the prophets that they encoded in the Bible, and that God revealed the interpretation of those biblical texts to their own teacher, who shared it only with them. Greek teachers like Plato and sometimes Jewish teachers would leave certain points obscure to keep them from outsiders; only those who were serious enough to persevere would understand.

**4:12.** The point in the context of Isaiah 6:9–10, which Jesus quotes here, is that God’s people had hardened their hearts so that they could not hear him; God thus chose to harden them further (what some have called “penal blindness”) by sending them his message anyway.

**4:13–14.** This most basic message is the foundation for the rest: Jesus’ message must be embraced with endurance and without distraction from the world to produce its intended effect.

**4:15.** Judaism recognized Satan as the ultimate accuser and tempter; by mentioning him, Jesus immediately notifies his disciples of the seriousness of forgetting his word. Other rabbis also taught that forgetting a teaching of Scripture was a serious offense, but they would have resented a teacher who claimed unique authority for his own message.

**4:16–17.** Judaism valued its heroes of the past who had refused to compromise God’s word, even in the face of death. Jesus’ description of apostasy when persecuted for the message of the kingdom thus would evoke the disciples’ discomfort and self-examination.

**4:18–20.** The fruitful “seeds” presumably spread the word and multiply disciples (as well-trained disciples of rabbis were supposed to do when they became teachers in their own right; part of the goal was to increase obedience to the law).

#### **4:21–25**

##### **Accountability for the Word**

Had another rabbi uttered the words of 4:22 in this context (contrast Mt 5:15), it would mean bringing forth treasures (special insights) concealed in Scripture. Thus Jesus claims to reveal God’s message; he calls his disciples to understand and build on his teaching.

**4:21–23.** Jesus is a master of the graphic illustrations in which Jewish teachers sought to excel: invisible light is pointless, and God wants the light of his word to be received. The lamps were small clay lamps that had to be set on a stand to shed much light in a room; a bushel basket placed over the lamp would no doubt extinguish it.

**4:24–25.** The conventional wisdom was that each person is accountable for what he or she does with what he or she had originally been given; Jesus applies this principle to his own teaching. Thus if the crowds did not obey what light they had received, they would never receive more. The language of “measuring” is the language of weighing food and other commodities at the market; Jewish texts sometimes use it for God’s measuring out just judgments in the final day.

#### **4:26–32**

##### **A Microcosm of the Future Kingdom**

It was commonly realized that God would someday establish his kingdom, or rule, unchallenged

over all the earth. Jesus and his small band of close followers may have seemed too obscure to contain the future glory of the kingdom, but the seed of the word would continue to spread from them until the final coming of the kingdom. Jesus' teaching challenges prevailing views of how the kingdom would come.

**4:26–29.** Every farmer would have agreed that God's providence, not the farmer's power, made the grain grow. (Thus pagan and Jewish farmers alike sought divine help for their crops; pagan farmers relied heavily on sacrifices.)

**4:30–32.** Scholars still dispute what plant is meant by the "mustard seed." Nevertheless, by no conjecture is it the smallest of all seeds that Jesus' listeners could have known (the orchid seed is smaller). The point is that it was proverbially small and yet yielded a large shrub. Around the Sea of Galilee, it can reach a height of ten feet and has sometimes reached fifteen feet, although its usual height is about four feet. Because it would grow anew each year, birds could not nest in it when they built nests in early spring; but small birds could light on it, all that is necessary to fulfill the language here (an allusion to a bigger tree in Dan 4:12). The hyperbole Jesus applies to the best image of growth from tiny to large that he had available does not change the point, however; the kingdom might begin in obscurity, but it would culminate in glory.

#### **4:33–34**

##### **Secret Teachings**

Sometimes Jewish (and other ancient) teachers had some special esoteric teachings that they could confide only in their closest pupils, because they were not for public knowledge. People could not be ready to grasp the secret of the nature of Jesus' kingdom until the secret about the nature of his messiahship had been revealed (see the introduction to Mark in this commentary).

#### **4:35–41**

##### **Lord of Creation**

Rousing a sleeping prophet to secure his prayers may have reminded the disciples or first hearers of Jonah 1:5–6, but Jesus appears quite different from Jonah here. Some ancient pagan stories told of powerful individuals able to subdue even the forces of nature, but these were nearly always gods or, rarely, heroes of the distant past. Many Jewish people believed that angels controlled the forces of nature, such as winds and sea; yet such angels did have one to whom they must answer. In Jewish tradition, the one who ruled the winds and sea was God himself (Ps 107:29; cf. Jon 1:15). The disciples' surprise at Jesus' power is thus easy to understand.

Storms often rose suddenly on the lake called the Sea of Galilee; these fishermen had usually stayed closer to Capernaum and are unprepared for a squall this far from shore. The only place one could sleep in a small fishing boat with water pouring in from a storm would be on the elevated stern, where one could use the wooden or leather-covered helmsman's seat, or a pillow kept under that seat, as a cushion for one's head. Jesus' sleep during the storm may indicate the tranquillity of faith (Ps 4:8; cf. 2 Kings 6:16–17, 32; Prov 19:23); in some Greek stories, the genuineness of philosophers' faith in their own teachings on tranquility was tested in storms.

#### **5:1–20**

##### **Overpowering a Legion of Demons**

Jesus could bind the strong man no one else could bind (3:27; 5:3–4).

**5:1.** Matthew's "Gadara" (Mt 8:28), nearly eight miles from the lake, is more accurate than Mark's "Gerasa," a prominent city over thirty miles southeast from the lake by a straight line and a longer journey by road. But both towns were in the same general region, the area of the Decapolis, a predominantly non-Jewish area, and Mark appears to be writing for readers who were far from this area and who would be less concerned with details of Syro-Palestinian geography than Matthew's readers would be.

**5:2.** Jewish people considered tombs unclean for Jews and a popular haunt for demons. People in many ancient cultures brought offerings for the dead, which might also appeal to these spirits. The time is night (4:35), when evil spirits were thought to exercise the greatest power. Mark thus sets the stage for ancient readers to feel the suspense of the ensuing conflict.

**5:3–5.** Some pagan worship had involved cutting oneself with stones (1 Kings 18:28), and both

self-mortification and supernatural strength occur in conjunction with spirit possession in many cultures today.

**5:6–8.** In ancient magic, higher spirits would be invoked to drive out lower spirits, and the demons here appeal to the only one higher than Jesus to keep Jesus from driving them out: “I adjure you by God” (not “Swear to God”— NIV). This language invokes a curse on Jesus if he does not comply. (Phrases like “I adjure you” and “I know you”— Mk 1:23 –appear in ancient magical exorcism texts as self-protective invocations to bind the spiritual opponent.) The attempt at magical self-protection proves powerless against Jesus. Not only Jews but also Gentiles sometimes called Israel’s God “the Most High.”

**5:9.** Identification of spirits’ names or the names by which those spirits could be subdued was standard in ancient exorcism texts (see ancient magical texts and the Testament of Solomon); but this case, where many demons are present, is the only recorded example of Jesus seeking a name, and here he does not seem to use it in the exorcism.

A legion included four thousand to six thousand troops. This man is therefore hosting a large number of demons; they probably outnumber the pigs (5:13).

**5:10.** Ancients were familiar with demons pleading for mercy or other concessions when they were about to be defeated (e.g., 1 Enoch 12–14; Testament of Solomon 2:6). Perhaps they wish to stay in the area only because of the tombs, but in ancient lore spirits were often associated with particular local areas.

**5:11–12.** Only Gentiles (or very nonobservant Jews) raised pigs, and Jewish readers would think of pigs as among the most unclean animals and rightful hosts of evil spirits. Ancient exorcists found that demons often asked for concessions if the pressure for them to evacuate their host was becoming too great for them to stay.

**5:13.** Jewish tradition often taught that demons could die, so many ancient readers would assume that the demons had been destroyed (or at least disabled) with their hosts. (Some traditions also portrayed at least some demons as fearing water—Testament of Solomon 5:11–12; but in other traditions, certain demons lived in water. What is significant in the Gospel accounts is the much greater dependence of demons on their hosts than in most other sources from the period.)

**5:14–17.** The opposition to Jesus arises from both economic interests—the loss of a large herd of swine—and some Greek conceptions of dangerous wonderworking magicians, whom the people would fear.

**5:18.** In ancient stories, those recovering from madness might be unaware of their prior state (e.g., Leucippe in Achilles Tattius), but this was not always the case (Dan 4:34–37).

**5:19–20.** Because his messiahship would be misunderstood, Jesus kept it a secret in predominantly Jewish areas. In the predominantly non-Jewish Decapolis, however, where people would perceive him as a magician, he urges his new disciple to spread word about what *God* had done, thereby correcting the people’s misunderstanding (cf. 2 Maccabees 3:36).

## **5:21–43**

### **Healing a Girl and an Outcast Woman**

This passage includes two cases of uncleanness: a woman with a continual flow of blood and a corpse (see Lev 15:19–33; Num 19:11–22). Even after the flow stopped, the first woman would be counted unclean for seven days (Lev 15:28); the dead girl was even more unclean (Num 19:11).

**5:21–24.** “Rulers of the synagogue” were the chief officials in synagogues (distinct from the attendant, Lk 4:20) and were prominent members of their communities. Jairus’s daughter had been a minor until that year and on account of both her age and her gender had virtually no social status. One would fall at the feet of someone of much greater status (like a king) or prostrate oneself before God; for this prominent man to humble himself in this way before Jesus was thus to recognize Jesus’ power in a serious way.

**5:25.** This woman’s sickness was reckoned as if she had a menstrual period all month long; it made her continually unclean under the law (Lev 15:25–28)—a social and religious problem on top of the physical one. The ailment probably started after puberty; given an average ancient life expectancy of about forty years and the “twelve years” that she had been ill, she may have spent half or all her adult life with this trouble.

**5:26.** Many practices of both Jewish and Gentile physicians in biblical times were no more than superstitious remedies, so it is not surprising that they had proved ineffective (cf. 2 Chron 16:12; Tobit 2:10; Qumran *Genesis Apocryphon* 20:19–20). Although many physicians in the Greek world were slaves, Palestinian Jewish sources suggest that physicians in Palestine had

ample incomes.

**5:27–29.** If this woman touched anyone or anyone’s clothes, she rendered that person ceremonially unclean for the rest of the day (cf. Lev 15:26–27). Some uncleanness was unavoidable, but it was inconvenient to fulfill the required bath, and men avoided uncleanness when they could. Because she rendered unclean anyone she touched, she should not have even been in this heavy crowd. Later Jewish tradition made this danger even more serious than Leviticus had (e.g., Mishnah *Toharot* 5:8), so many teachers avoided touching women altogether, lest they become accidentally contaminated. Thus she could not touch or be touched, was probably now divorced or had never married, and was marginal to Jewish society.

**5:30–34.** Jewish people believed that only teachers closest to God had supernatural knowledge. Jesus uses his supernatural knowledge to identify with the woman who had touched him—even though in the eyes of the public this would mean that he had contracted ritual uncleanness. Given the frequent failure of the male disciples’ faith (8:17–21; 9:19), Mark’s record of this woman’s faith (cf. 7:29; 12:44; 15:40–41) is all the more striking, especially for readers whose culture considered women less stable and emotionally weaker than men.

**5:35–39.** Several professional mourners were required even at the funeral of the poorest person; more mourners would assemble at the death of a member of a prominent family like this one. Because bodies decomposed rapidly in Palestine, mourners had to be assembled immediately upon someone’s death, and they had gathered before word even reached Jairus that his daughter had died. Messengers were normally dispatched immediately to bring a parent or spouse the sad news.

**5:40–43.** In that culture, at the age of twelve the girl was a virgin probably soon to be married (women were not able to continue in education or public employment as they do today). Young girls usually looked forward eagerly to their wedding day as the most joyous event in their life, and to die unmarried—especially just short of it—was lamented as a particularly great tragedy. Jesus spoke to her in Aramaic, perhaps her first language, although Greek was widely spoken in Palestine. (On the use of Aramaic in healings, see comment on 7:34–35.)

## **6:1–6**

### **Jesus’ Rejection in His Hometown**

The Old Testament often reiterates the principle of the prophet without honor: Jeremiah, Moses, Joseph and so forth; subsequent Jewish tradition emphasized this concept even more. That Jesus is “unable” to do works because of their unbelief presumes a limitation not of his power but of his mission: to heal without morally directed faith would be to act like the pagan magicians of antiquity.

In 6:3, Jesus is called a “carpenter.” Early in Jesus’ childhood, Sepphoris, then capital of Galilee, had been destroyed by the Romans, and rebuilding had begun immediately. Thus carpenters were no doubt in demand in Nazareth, a village four miles from the ruins of Sepphoris; and Joseph, Jesus’ father, probably taught his son his own trade, as was common for fathers to do in those days. After Sepphoris had been rebuilt, they probably did most carpentry work from their home, as most Galilean carpenters did. The observation that Jesus is a carpenter is meant to identify him, not to suggest the unlikelihood of a carpenter being a teacher, for we also know of other carpenters who became famous teachers (e.g., Shammai).

“Brothers” and “sisters” are the usual terms for siblings; a different term for more general “kinfolk” (e.g., Rom 16:11) is not used with regard to Jesus’ siblings. This text undoubtedly refers to children born to Mary after Jesus.

## **6:7–13**

### **Traveling Representatives of Jesus**

**6:7.** It was customary to send heralds, or messengers, by twos, in both Greek and Jewish culture. In Judaism, such pairing also provided validation for their testimony (Deut 17:6; 19:15).

**6:8–9.** They are to travel light, like some other groups: (1) peasants, who often had only one cloak (though they did not travel much); (2) some traveling philosophers, called Cynics; (3) some prophets, like Elijah and John the Baptist. They are to be totally committed to their mission, not tied down with worldly concerns. The “bag” would have been used for begging (like the Cynics’ bags).

**6:10.** Hospitality was highly valued. Like some of the early synagogues, early churches found it most practical to meet in homes and to use them as a base of operation in reaching the rest of the community.

**6:11.** “Shaking the dust off” meant essentially treating these Jewish cities as if they were unclean, pagan cities, no dust of which the true followers of God would want remaining on them.

**6:12–13.** Oil was sometimes used medicinally, and in the Old Testament it was often associated with divine commissioning. Thus it was a useful symbol in prayer for healing (Jas 5:14).

#### **6:14–29**

##### **The Politician Murders the Prophet**

**6:14–16.** Herod Antipas was technically tetrarch (with Matthew and Luke), not “king”; Mark may use the latter term loosely or ironically. Herod’s appeal for the title “king” under Herodias’s influence led to his banishment in A.D. 39; this could support Mark’s use of the term ironically.

Some Greeks (and Jews influenced by them) believed in reincarnation; but John’s return is said instead to be a “rising from the dead” (as a few persons had been raised by Old Testament prophets); Elijah had never died, and many Jewish people anticipated his return (Mal 4:5). Reincarnation is thus not in view here.

**6:17–19.** Herod’s affair with his sister-in-law, whom he had by this time married, was widely known. Indeed, the affair had led him to divorce his first wife, whose father, a king, later went to war with Herod over the issue and defeated him. John’s denunciation of the affair as unlawful (besides being adultery, it violated incest prohibitions; see Lev 18:16; 20:21) was an attack against Herod’s adultery, but Herod could have perceived it as a political threat, given the political ramifications that later led to a major military defeat. (Josephus claims that many viewed Herod’s humiliation in the war as divine judgment for his executing John the Baptist.) It has been suggested that Herod’s half-brother Herod Philip may be called by the secondary name Philip here to avoid confusing him with the main Herod in the story, Herod Antipas.

**6:20.** Despite Antipas’s grounds for animosity toward John (6:17–19), it is not incredible that he would enjoy hearing him (cf. Ezek 33:31–33). Many well-to-do Greeks, fancying themselves patrons of intellectual pursuits, supported philosophers more for cultural and entertainment purposes than for ethical edification. Influenced by upper-class Greek ideals, Herod undoubtedly considered himself as open-minded culturally as he was brutal politically.

**6:21.** Celebrating birthdays was at this time a Greek and Roman but not a Jewish custom, although the Jewish aristocracy had imbibed plenty of Greek culture by this period. Herod held tight, centralized control over Galilee, and the officials he invites are probably local village and regional leaders loyal to his government; in all Galilee, only Tiberias and probably Sepphoris were cities organized after the Greek model.

**6:22.** It is otherwise known that the Herodian court was given to excesses like those described here. Some scholars suggest that Herodias’s daughter Salome is at this point no longer a young girl and is already married to the tetrarch Philip. Other historical data about her, however, suggest that she may be no older than twelve or fourteen (which was a common age for virgins to marry in Jewish Palestine); it is possible that she is even slightly younger. On any reading, Herod’s vulgarity is perverse; after taking his brother’s wife (cf. Lev 20:21), he lusts after his wife’s daughter (cf. Lev 20:14).

**6:23.** This is the sort of oath one might make while drunk, but it is especially reminiscent of the Persian king stirred by Queen Esther’s beauty (Esther 5:3, 6; 7:2), though this girl’s request is far less noble than Esther’s. But Herod’s oath is not backed up with adequate authority; as a Roman vassal he has no authority to give away any of his kingdom.

**6:24.** The girl has to go “out” to ask her mother. Excavations at Herod’s fortress Machaerus suggest two dining halls, one for women and one for men. Herodias has thus presumably not been present to watch Herod’s reaction to the dance. Josephus characterizes Herodias the same way Mark does: a jealous, ambitious schemer (she and Antipas ultimately did themselves in; see comment on 6:14–16).

**6:25.** Beheading by the sword was the method of executing Roman citizens and other individuals of status; lower-class individuals were usually executed by crucifixion or other means, unless the matter were urgent. Salome’s asking for John’s head on a platter means that she wants it served up as part of the dinner menu—a ghastly touch of ridicule.

**6:26–28.** Although an oath like Herod’s was not legally binding, breaking an oath before dinner guests would have been embarrassing; it is known that even the emperor would not lightly do it. Tacitus, who despised Nero, reports how this despicable man had heads of his victims brought to him; Mark’s readers are meant to get the same revolting impression of Herod and Herodias that Tacitus wished to convey of Nero. Unlike Judean Jewish leaders who

needed Pilate's approval to enact legal executions, Herod Antipas was acting ruler in his own domain.

**6:29.** If a man had sons, the eldest son was normally responsible for his father's burial; here John's disciples must fulfill this role for him. Because he had been executed, the disciples perform a dangerous task unless they had Herod's permission to take the body (contrast the absence of Jesus' male disciples in 15:42–47!).

### **6:30–44**

#### **A Shepherd Feeds His Sheep**

**6:30–34.** Jesus' care for the sheep (6:34) is modeled on God's care for his people in Ezekiel 34:5, 15; this care is likewise expressed by providing sound teaching (cf. Ezek 34:4; Jer 23; Num 27:17).

**6:35–38.** Fish and especially bread were central components of the Palestinian diet; meat was rarely available except at feasts. Food was always sold in village markets, and the Galilean countryside was full of villages (6:36); but Jesus had withdrawn his followers some distance from the nearest villages (6:32). Even the larger villages would have under three thousand inhabitants; despite Galilee's agricultural self-sufficiency, feeding the crowd in the villages would thus have been difficult. But it would have taken more than two hundred days of an average person's wages (around seven months of hard labor) to feed the great multitude that had assembled.

**6:39.** That the grass is green indicates that it is spring, around Passover.

**6:40.** Jesus' followers are organized in ranks like armies in the Old Testament and in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The purpose is to facilitate the distribution of food, but some people in the crowd may have thought that Jesus was organizing them as ranks for a messianic army (cf. Jn 6:15). (Mark records this organizing, however, simply to emphasize the great numbers fed.)

**6:41.** It was customary to begin a meal by giving thanks for the bread and then dividing it.

**6:42–44.** The multiplication of food is reminiscent of the miracle of God supplying manna for Israel in the wilderness, and especially of Elisha multiplying food (2 Kings 4:42–44, where some was also left over). Ancient ethics frowned on wasting leftovers, although aristocrats often flaunted such waste. The term for "baskets" here was often used for wicker food baskets but could also mean the large baskets in which Roman soldiers carried their supplies.

### **6:45–52**

#### **Walking on Water**

**6:45–48.** The language of "passing by" may refer to how God's glory "passed by" in the Old Testament (Ex 33:19; Job 9:11), which also described God as "treading" upon the waves (Job 9:8).

**6:49.** Although not all Jewish teachers sanctioned a belief in ghosts, it existed on the popular level and contradicted the standard Jewish (and New Testament) teaching that the righteous and wicked dead are separated at death in view of the coming resurrection.

**6:50–52.** "It is I" (NIV, NASB, KJV, etc.) is literally "I am." Although the former is the primary meaning here, in this context it is possible that Jesus (or Mark) also intends to allude to a particular nuance of the latter meaning: "I am" may refer back to the God of the Old Testament (Ex 3:14; cf. comment on Mk 6:45–48).

### **6:53–56**

#### **Crowds Seek Healing**

Carrying the sick on their mats or touching Jesus' cloak imitated earlier expressions of faith (see comment on 2:3–5; 5:27–29). Evidence from ancient pagan healing shrines suggests that once someone was healed in a particular way or at a particular place, others often tried to get healing by the same method. The marketplaces (6:56) constituted the largest open area of a town or village, where larger crowds could gather. In contrast to Greek cities, market areas in Galilean towns were not always located in the center of the town.

### **7:1–23**

#### **True and False Religion**

Controversy over Jesus' treatment of uncleanness (1:40–45; 5:21–43) and other religious issues

(e.g., 2:1–3:35) climaxes in a confrontation over the failure of Jesus' disciples to wash their hands.

**7:1.** It is not clear why Pharisees, most of whom were centered in Jerusalem, would have come to Galilee. Some commentators have suggested that they came to evaluate Jesus' teaching, to see if he were a false teacher leading people astray (see Deut 13:13–14). This suggestion is possible; but had their mission been so serious, Mark would probably have mentioned it. They may have simply wished to hear and evaluate this popular teacher in a general way; or perhaps these represent a small number of Pharisees who did live in Galilee. Plenty of scribes already lived in Galilee.

**7:2–3.** The Pharisees were scrupulous about washing their hands as part of ritual purity, though this rule was not found in the Old Testament and may have originally derived from Greek influence. Mark gives his Gentile readers only a cursory summary of a much more complex custom (which some scholars think was limited to particular days), although his readers may have been familiar with related Jewish purity practices in their own parts of the world (Diaspora Jews were known for washing their hands).

**7:4.** Washing the hands removed partial ceremonial impurity picked up in the marketplace; hands were apparently immersed up to the wrist or purified by having water poured over them from a pure vessel. The Pharisees also had rules about immersing vessels to remove impurity.

**7:5.** The Pharisees held their traditions in high regard; unwilling to innovate more than necessary, they grounded everything they could in the teachings of their predecessors. Thus they want to know where Jesus, as a popular teacher, stands on issues on which their tradition commented (such as washing hands), so they can evaluate his teaching accordingly.

**7:6–8.** Jesus quotes a prophecy of Isaiah decreed against the Israel of Isaiah's day (Is 29:13), which had been religious in form but not close to God in heart (Is 1:10–20). The very thing the Pharisees prized as spiritual—traditions derived from many pious and wise teachers who had tried to interpret and apply God's law—Jesus claims is undercutting the plain message of God.

**7:9–13.** Many Jewish teachers regarded the commandment to honor father and mother as the most important in the law. Jewish interpreters included in this commandment providing for one's parents when they were old. At the same time, tradition allowed that various items could be sacrificed or dedicated to the use of God's temple. ("Corban" appears on sacrificial vessels and means "consecrated to God"; in popular usage, it could also mean "forbidden to so-and-so.") One school of Jewish teachers in Jesus' day declared that a vow that something was consecrated and forbidden to others applied even to family members, even if those to whom it was forbidden included them only accidentally.

Some apparently religious people had been using this practice to withhold what should have otherwise gone to the support of their parents—against Pharisaic belief that one should support one's parents. Jesus attacks here not the Pharisees' religious theory but their inconsistency with that theory in practice: their love for the law had led them (like some modern Christians) to such attention to its legal details that it created loopholes for them to violate the spirit of the law.

**7:14–15.** Other teachers are occasionally reported to have uttered sayings similar to Jesus' statement here, but only rarely and in private. If Jesus' words are taken literally, they declare the whole clean/unclean distinction emphasized in the law as of only symbolic value. Because this distinction constituted one of the main barriers between Jews and Gentiles (see Rom 14), Jesus' statement opens the way for racial and cultural reconciliation in table fellowship.

**7:16–19.** Jesus says that food does not affect what a person really is; writing in a day of conflict between the customs of Jewish and Gentile Christians, Mark applies this point to the kosher laws of Leviticus 11: pigs, dogs, bats, owls and so on are now "clean," or acceptable to eat. Mark's proposal would not have been popular among most Jewish people. Liberal Alexandrian Jews who no longer believed in literal observance of the food laws (Lev 11; Deut 14) were particularly despised by their more conservative colleagues in Egypt and certainly found few allies in Palestine.

**7:20–23.** Other Jewish teachers would have agreed that the vices listed by Jesus were evil and that they came from the heart. (Vice lists were also a common teaching technique of ancient moralists.) But they would not have agreed with Jesus that most of themselves were more concerned about legal details than ethics, even though as lawyers they necessarily spent more time dealing with legal issues than with transforming the heart.

**7:24–30**

**A Gentile Woman's Faith**

If “unclean” foods such as pigs and dogs were no longer unclean (7:16–19), neither were Gentiles. Although Jesus wins all his controversies with the religious authorities in Mark, he allows himself to be persuaded by a Gentile woman’s desperate retort. This story would encourage Mark’s Gentile readers, who were being persecuted for a faith that many simply regarded as a Jewish heresy.

**7:24–26.** Jewish people did not expect much faith from pagans, especially from pagan women. Like Sidon, Tyre belonged to ancient Phoenicia, and the most prominent woman from Phoenicia in the Old Testament was the wicked Jezebel. But another Phoenician woman who petitioned Elijah in the same generation received God’s favor for her son (1 Kings 17:17–24). Greek culture had long influenced Syria, and many Greeks had settled there; the citizen class of the Phoenician republics Tyre and Sidon was thoroughly Hellenized. Thus she is both Syrophoenician and Greek.

**7:27–28.** Jewish people did not regularly call non-Jews “dogs,” as some commentators have argued. Rather, Jesus is making his point by way of illustration, as wise teachers in his day often did. Worthless food would be cast to the dogs (cf. Ex 22:31). In Jewish Palestine, dogs were regarded as scavengers, but in well-to-do households influenced by Greek custom (more familiar to the Syrophoenician woman), dogs were sometimes pets. Jesus is making an illustration: the children must be fed before the pets, and the Jewish people therefore had first claim (e.g., Ex 4:22).

He is saying that he will not heal like pagan magicians; he wants her to demonstrate faith, specifically faith in the supremacy of the true God. (Her reply takes up his illustration: she concedes the priority of the Jewish people, the children, but protests that even the dogs get to eat crumbs. In so arguing, she indicates her faith that only the smallest fraction of his power is necessary to heal her daughter.)

**7:29–30.** In the Old Testament, faith was often expressed in bold zeal, holy chutzpah, by women of faith (2 Kings 4:14–28), prophets (Ex 33:12–34:9; 1 Kings 18:36–37; 2 Kings 2:2, 4, 6, 9) and other heroes (Gen 32:26–30). These examples all combine humble respect for God or his prophet with boldly urgent entreaty, and God answers these prayers.

### **7:31–37**

#### **A Deaf–Mute Healed**

**7:31.** The Decapolis, literally “ten cities” (see 5:1–20), was predominantly inhabited by non-Jews, though many Jews also lived there.

**7:32–33.** Deaf–mutes were protected under Jewish law but classed with other groups (women, slaves, imbeciles, minors) not educated enough to keep the law. Crowds normally gathered to see magicians do their tricks, and this crowd would have preferred to have seen Jesus heal a man in front of them, though he does not do so. On the spittle see 8:22–23; here Jesus may be acting out “healing,” “speech” and (7:34) “from God,” to let the man know what he is about to do (Jewish law recognized that deaf–mutes could communicate via signs). Mark’s term for “mute” occurs in the Septuagint only at Isaiah 35:6, referring to the blessings inaugurated in the messianic era.

**7:34–35.** Some scholars point out that magicians often spoke unintelligible phrases during healings. Here, however, Jesus speaks Aramaic, which would have been known to most people, Jewish or Gentile, in Syria–Palestine (cf. also Mk 14:36).

### **8:1–13**

#### **Feeding the Four Thousand**

See 6:30–44 for more background on this passage. Jesus was not limited to doing a miracle only once; he could repeat them whenever necessary (8:19–21; cf. 2 Kings 2:19–22; 4:1–7, 38–41, 42–44; 7:16).

**8:1–4.** Galilee was full of towns and villages, so Jesus purposely withdraws his disciples some distance away, presumably to secure privacy for instructing his disciples.

**8:5–7.** Bread and fish were basic staples; it was customary to give thanks before a meal.

**8:8–10.** The term for basket here (different from the one in chap. 6) refers to a reed basket often used for carrying fish. This feeding miracle, like the earlier one, is reminiscent of Elisha.

**8:11–13.** Most ancient peoples, including most Jewish people by this time, believed that signs in the heavens could portend events about to take place; unusual signs could portend the death of a ruler, the fall of a city and so forth. The specific nature of the Pharisees’ request for a sign here is unclear. If they want him to call down fire from heaven or to perform a similar cosmic

sign, they are requiring a sign that none of the would-be prophets of the day had offered. If they are asking Jesus to predict and interpret an event in the heavens, they are requesting astrological prognostication, which Deuteronomy 18:10 forbade (as divination). Because “heaven” was a Jewish title for God, it is also possible that they simply mean a sign “from God.” In view of Mark 8:1–10, the reader recognizes how foolish Jesus’ opponents are. Ancient literature sometimes used the denseness of opponents to underline the protagonist’s virtue.

#### **8:14–21**

##### **Disciples Still Blind**

Mark’s Christian readers are confronted with a point less comfortable than the one in 8:11–13: not only Jesus’ opponents but even his disciples are dense.

**8:14.** The disciples’ concern over not having brought bread is reasonable in human terms; they are apparently headed for the east side of the lake, which was less heavily populated (though they could find bread in Bethsaida– 8:22). Their concern is heightened because bringing provisions had been their responsibility; teachers often delegated such matters to some of their disciples.

**8:15.** Yeast is used to represent various things in the Bible (unleavened bread in Ex 12:15–17 represents haste; in Mt 13:33, the kingdom; in 1 Cor 5:6–7, someone’s sin); the point here seems to be that it is something that spreads (as in Mt 13 and 1 Cor 5). Both Pharisaic piety and Herod as an agent of political power are corrupting influences.

**8:16–18.** The disciples are still spiritually half-blind, which is a moral fault in Mark 4:12 (and in the Old Testament: e.g., Is 29:9–10; 42:19–20; 44:18; Ezek 12:2).

**8:19–21.** The disciples should have seen enough bread miracles not to worry about earthly bread and to catch Jesus’ plain point. Instead, they appear more like the Israelites in the wilderness, who never learned faith despite all that God had done for them.

#### **8:22–26**

##### **Blindness Half-Cured**

**8:22–23.** Spittle was sometimes associated with healing; it was also often considered disgusting and may have tested the blind man’s desire to be healed.

**8:24–25.** This is the only two-stage healing in the Gospels, and miracle stories in antiquity usually stress the suddenness of the miracle; healing by degrees was quite rare. This narrative is therefore significant and probably represents an acted parable: unlike Jesus’ opponents, the disciples have begun to see but remain blind (8:16–18) until he touches them again at his resurrection (9:9). The Old Testament prophets sometimes acted out parables to get people’s attention and communicate their point (e.g., Is 20:2–6; Jer 19:1–15; Ezek 4:1–5:17; 12:1–11).

**8:26.** Prophets usually presented healed persons to their families (1 Kings 17:23; 2 Kings 4:36), but Jesus’ private action here emphasizes the messianic secret (see the introduction to Mark in this commentary). Had the man returned to the town, everyone would have known of the miracle.

#### **8:27–30**

##### **The Disciples Half-See**

**8:27.** Caesarea Philippi was a pagan city known especially for its grotto dedicated to the worship of Pan, a Greek nature god. Thus we might think this region an unlikely place for the disciples’ first recognition of Jesus’ messiahship. “Villages of Caesarea Philippi” accurately depicts the area; throughout the Hellenistic world, villages were dependent on the city in whose territory they were located.

**8:28.** Because many Palestinian Jews believed that prophets in the Old Testament sense had ceased, ranking Jesus among the prophets would have been radical—but it was not radical enough to grasp his true identity.

**8:29–30.** The “Messiah,” or “Christ,” is literally the “anointed one”—not just any anointed one but the anointed king, descended from David, who would restore sovereignty to Israel (Is 9:6–7; 11:1–10; Ps 2). There were many different views of the Messiah (or messiahs) in Jesus’ time, but they all revolved around an earthly deliverance and earthly kingdom. Peter is right to call Jesus “Messiah,” but what Peter means by the term and what Jesus means by it are entirely different at this point (see Mk 8:31–32). Although Jesus’ future kingdom would transform the world irresistibly, the present aspect of his messianic mission in the Gospels is to transform human

hearts to live out the values of the kingdom in the face of the opposition of this age.

### **8:31–9:1**

#### **Jesus Explains His Messianic Mission**

**8:31.** People throughout Greco–Roman antiquity commonly believed that someone about to die could make predictions about the future, and many believed that holy men could forecast their own death. This background may not be relevant here, however; some have proposed other interpretations of Jesus' foreknowledge here. Knowing the character of the temple authorities and their likely response to his actions in the temple (11:15–18) could have enabled Jesus to predict his death; his actions virtually provoked it. Some of Mark's hearers may have thought in either of these terms here; but another observation explains more of the evidence. Jesus' words here are shaped especially by his mission, which accords with Old Testament prophecy (Is 52:13–53:12).

**8:32.** The New Testament writers interpreted some Old Testament texts as referring to the Messiah's suffering, but most Jewish people in the first century did not recognize these texts as referring to the Messiah, who was to reign as king. Most Jewish people believed in the resurrection of all the righteous dead at the end of the age, and the inauguration of a kingdom under God's appointed ruler afterward. Jesus' explanation of his mission in 8:31 thus seems to Peter to contradict his confession of Jesus' messiahship in 8:29.

**8:33.** "Satan" originally meant "adversary" and could be used in the plural (though the plural is extremely rare); but in early Christian and most early Jewish writings it refers specifically to the devil. One could be said to act like someone else, however (e.g., John "in the spirit and power of Elijah"— Lk 1:17), and Jesus probably uses hyperbole to make the point: Peter is just like Satan in preferring the worldly to the divine (cf. Mt 4:8–10). Calling Peter by the name of the ultimate tempter and accuser underlines the seriousness of his failure as a disciple at this point.

The proper position of a disciple is "behind" his master, "following" him; "get behind me" may call Peter back to his rightful position of subservience. In Greek circles a person could be reproached for thinking in human rather than divine terms.

**8:34–37.** The cross was an instrument of violent and painful execution. To "take the cross" was to carry the horizontal beam of the cross out to the site of execution, generally past a jeering mob. In rhetorically strong terms, Jesus describes what all true disciples must be ready for: if they follow him, they must be ready to face literal scorn and death, for they must follow to the cross. Because life is worth more than the world itself, giving one's life in this world to gain it in the world to come is a wise transaction (cf. 2 Baruch 17:2–3; 51:15–16); there was nothing else one could give in exchange for it (Ps 49:7, 15).

**8:38.** "Son of Man" here may refer back to Daniel 7:13–14. The kingdom for which the disciples are hoping would ultimately come; but it will be preceded by a period of great suffering and wickedness. Many others in Jesus' day believed that great suffering and sin would precede the kingdom; but Peter and his colleagues prefer the easier view that it would not, or at least that their side would triumph supernaturally at no cost to themselves.

**9:1.** This verse points to the future glory mentioned in the preceding verses by way of an anticipatory revelation of that glory they are to experience in 9:2–13. Because the future Messiah had already come, the glory of his future kingdom was also already present.

### **9:2–13**

#### **Glory on the Mountain**

God had revealed his glory to Moses on Mount Sinai, so that Moses had come down from the mountain reflecting God's glory (Ex 32–34). In Mark 9:2–13, the glory of Jesus, who is greater than Moses and Elijah, is revealed on the mountain; he is thus the ultimate spokesperson for God (Deut 18:18–19).

**9:2.** Mount Sinai was where God revealed his glory. Jesus waits "six days" to ascend a mountain to make the same point (Ex 24:16). That Jesus takes three companions may allude to Exodus 24:1, 9, although this is less clear (70 elders were also present in that account). Transformation or transfiguration appears in both Greek myth and Jewish apocalyptic literature, but the background of Jesus' transformation here must be Moses' glorification on Mount Sinai.

**9:3.** Jewish literature often described angels and other heavenly beings as being clothed in white. Laundering (cf. NIV "bleach") was normally a housewife's task, but this text refers to professional launderers, who could be men or women.

**9:4.** Elijah reportedly never died; Moses was buried by God himself, and some (unbiblical)

Jewish traditions even claimed that Moses was still alive (cf. comment on Rev 11:6). These two figures were both expected to return in some sense before the time of the end.

**9:5–6.** Peter’s suggestion of erecting shelters on the mountain may allude to Israel’s tabernacles in the wilderness, recognizing God’s presence among the Israelites in Moses’ day.

**9:7.** The heavenly voice repeats the basic message of Mark 1:11 but may add another biblical allusion. “Hear him” may refer to Deuteronomy 18:15, where the Israelites are warned to heed the “prophet like Moses,” the new Moses who would come.

**9:8.** One may compare Elijah and Moses’ vanishing with a Jewish belief assumed especially by the later rabbis that Elijah could come and go at will, like an angel.

**9:9–10.** Given their cultural presuppositions, it was difficult for the disciples to understand what had happened; they assumed that all the righteous dead would be resurrected simultaneously at the end of the age (cf. Dan 12:2).

**9:11.** The Jewish people expected Elijah to come at the time of the end (Mal 4:5), to prepare the Lord’s way (Mal 3:1; Ecclus 48:1–10), though they held different views on his exact function.

**9:12.** Elijah would come “to restore all things,” that is, to reconcile families (Mal 4:6; later rabbis interpreted this restoration as straightening out Israel’s genealogies, but the text was probably understood more broadly in this period).

**9:13.** Most Jewish people were expecting the real Elijah (whom the disciples saw speaking with Jesus), but by applying the promise of Elijah to John, Jesus interprets it much more symbolically than most of his contemporaries would.

### **9:14–32**

#### **Insufficient Faith for Exorcism**

**9:14–15.** Most scribes did not claim the power to work miracles, in contrast to Jesus’ disciples (6:12–13). Teachers of the law knew the Bible better than the disciples did, so if the disciples could not demonstrate God’s power in other ways, they risked their credibility.

**9:16–18.** The possessed person’s lack of control over his own motor responses is paralleled by examples of spirit possession in many cultures through history and is attested in anthropological studies of spirit possession today. Some writers have noted parallels between this form of demonized activity and epileptic behavior (though epilepsy and demonic possession are distinguished in Mt 4:24); the parallels could indicate that the spirit gained access to the same centers in the brain where seizures could also be induced by other means.

**9:19.** Mature disciples were supposed to be able to carry on in their teacher’s absence; sometimes a teacher would delegate lectures to his advanced pupils. The matter at hand requires a different sort of preparation than lectures did (9:29), but Jesus had already prepared them (6:7–13).

**9:20–22.** Demoniacs were often self-destructive (cf. 5:5), which again characterizes many cases of spirit possession in diverse cultures. See also comment on 9:16–18.

**9:23–27.** Exorcists usually tried to subdue demons by incantations invoking higher spirits, by using smelly roots or by pain-compliance techniques. Jesus here uses only his command, showing his great authority.

**9:28–30.** Jewish teachers often explained more mature subjects to their disciples in private. Some rabbis were seen as miracle workers, but not often did they expect their disciples to be able to do miracles—and certainly not in the rabbi’s name (v. 39). Exorcists’ methods normally focused on their own power or, more precisely, their ability to manipulate other powers; Jesus here emphasizes prayer instead (9:29).

**9:31.** The context of Daniel 7:13–14, which speaks of God entrusting his kingdom to one like a Son of Man, declares that suffering at the hands of the evil world ruler precedes exaltation (7:18–27).

**9:32.** Suffering was not part of the contemporary expectation for the Messiah; to understand Jesus’ message, the people need a paradigm shift in their categories and values (cf. Mk 8:29–33). Disciples always strove to be respectful toward their rabbis. They would regard their fellow disciples as their peer group and thus might not include the rabbi in a dispute among themselves.

### **9:33–37**

#### **The Greatest Is the Child**

**9:33–34.** Those with capital could advance economically, but most people in ancient society lacked sufficient capital for advancement and were thus locked into roles determined by birth.

Even those who improved economically could not break into the aristocracy. In other circles, rank was assigned by noble birth, by age or by advancement in the law; thus, for example, the Qumran sect annually reevaluated each member's rank, which determined their seating and speaking order. By whatever means it was determined, rank was a critical issue in ancient life (cf. comment on 1 Cor 14:27). Many Jewish people hoped for a new status in the world to come, based not on noble birth but on faithfulness to God's covenant.

**9:35.** In antiquity, as today, heroes or benevolent people with power were eminent. Rabbis stressed humility but expected their disciples to serve them.

**9:36.** Much more than today, in antiquity children were especially powerless in society and dependent on parents.

**9:37.** In Jewish custom, a person's agent, similar to a modern business representative, could act on behalf of the person who sent him. To the extent that he accurately represented the one who sent him, the agent was supported by the sender's full authority; the principle was applied in the Old Testament to God's messengers, his prophets (1 Sam 8:7).

## **9:38–41**

### **Turning Away a True Believer**

Here the disciples, who shortly before could not cast out a demon by using Jesus' name, criticize one of the "little ones" who did act in his name (cf. 9:37) by casting out demons (cf. Num 11:28). The format of this discussion resembles stories in which a famous teacher refutes the contentions of the less informed.

**9:38.** Sectarian attitudes were common in Judaism, as the Dead Sea Scrolls testify. (Some Jewish groups would break away from others over such issues as the correct day for Passover.)

**9:39.** Merely recognizing Jesus' name is one thing, but having the faith to do a miracle in that name indicates that this man was not just a typical exorcist trying to use a more powerful name to accomplish miracles, as exorcists often did (Acts 19:13–16).

**9:40.** "He who is not against you is for you" may have been a proverb (cf. several sources, including Cicero, a first-century B.C. Roman author); Jesus adapts it to make his point.

**9:41.** Here Jesus refers to those who are so poor that they have only water to give when a disciple comes to them (cf. 6:8–11). Such people are very poor even by ancient standards (1 Kings 17:12). This action reflects faith and hospitality one would normally show to teachers one respects (1 Kings 17:12–16; cf. Lk 11:5–6) but not to those one thought to be false (2 Jn 10). Jewish teachers often spoke of receiving one's "reward" when God judged the world.

## **9:42–50**

### **The Penalty for Turning a Believer Away**

**9:42.** "Stumble" was often used metaphorically to refer to sinning or falling away from the true faith. Millstones were extremely heavy; one would certainly drown with a millstone tied around one's neck. Further, this term refers to the heavier kind of millstone turned by a donkey, rather than the lighter kind a woman would use. Jewish people regarded this punishment as the awful sort that pagans might execute; thus the image is all the more dreadful. Death without burial (including death at sea) was regarded as the worst kind of death; pagans even believed that the spirit of the deceased hovered eternally over the waters where the person had died (see comment on Acts 27:20).

**9:43–47.** The imagery here is corporal punishment (cutting off appendages, e.g., Ex 21:24–25) versus capital punishment, the decree of eternal death pronounced by the heavenly court. Some Jewish thinkers believed that one would be resurrected in exactly the form in which one had died (e.g., with limbs missing, as in the case of many martyrs) before being made whole.

**9:48.** Here the imagery is from Isaiah 66:24. Although one could read Isaiah as applying only to the eternal destruction of corpses (cf. Eccles 10:11; 19:3), the imagery had nevertheless already begun to be applied to eternal torment (Judith 16:17).

**9:49.** Salt was used on sacrifices (Lev 2:13; Ezek 43:24; cf. Jubilees 21:11), so the image may be related to the burning of Mark 9:48.

**9:50.** Here Jesus apparently changes salt to a positive metaphor, perhaps meaning "peace." That real salt (as opposed to the impure salt mixtures available from some inland sea deposits) by definition does not lose its saltiness only reinforces the strength of the image (cf. comment on Mt 5:13). Being "at peace with one another" contrasts with the divisiveness related in Mark 9:33–38.

## 10:1–12

### Divorce Forbidden

Because 10:1–12 addresses the treatment of spouses, 10:13–16 deals with the treatment of children, and 10:17–31 relates to one's true household in the kingdom, some scholars have compared 10:1–31 to the ancient literary form "household code," except that this passage is in narrative form. If this comparison is apt, Mark's point runs precisely counter to the values of those codes in his culture, which stressed the absolute submission of wives, children and slaves (see comment on Eph 5:21–33).

**10:1.** Most teachers who taught in public did so in specific localities. Only figures popular with the masses drew such crowds as Jesus did wherever they went, and these popular teachers would naturally arouse the envy of many local professional scholars and the discomfort of the authorities.

**10:2.** Matthew's wording (Mt 19:3; see comment there) is closer to the exact wording Pharisees would normally have used at that time; the issue was the *grounds* for divorce, not whether divorce was ever valid. Because Moses had assumed the practice of divorce (Deut 24:1), Jewish interpreters debated only the grounds for divorce; to ask whether Jesus thinks divorce is permissible at all is to ask whether he knows or agrees with Moses' law.

**10:3–5.** Rabbis distinguished between what Scripture commanded and what it allowed as a concession; by asking what Moses "commanded" Jesus forces them to recognize that Moses explicitly only "permitted," not "commanded," divorce, on any grounds.

**10:6–9.** Jewish interpreters commonly appealed to one clear text of Scripture to show that another text could not mean what its interpreters claimed that it meant. Some interpreters, like the scribes who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, appealed to the creation narrative to show God's original plan for marriage. These interpreters used Genesis 1–2 to argue against polygamy; Jesus uses it to argue against divorce. (Reflecting Greek custom against polygamy, the Septuagint had substituted "two" for the original Hebrew "they" in Gen 2:24.)

**10:10.** Disciples often sought more detailed explanations from their teachers privately.

**10:11.** Like many wisdom sayings of ancient Jewish teachers, this saying is a general rule; Matthew (Mt 5:32) and Paul (1 Cor 7:15) give exceptions (on behalf of the innocent party divorced against his or her will). The saying is hyperbolic –that is, it has exaggerated, intensified force: because God does not accept divorce as valid, any man who divorces his wife is not really divorced, and if he marries someone else, he commits adultery. No one else in antiquity spoke of divorce in such strong terms. (Because most Jewish teachers allowed polygamy, they would not have seen marrying a second wife as adultery, even if they had agreed that the man was still married to the first wife. But Jesus eliminates the double standard; a man consorting with two women is as adulterous as a woman consorting with two men. Jesus' point is to advocate fidelity to one's first wife, not to break up existing polygamous unions.)

**10:12.** Unlike Roman law, Palestinian Jewish law did not permit a woman to divorce her husband (although under extreme circumstances she could request that the court force him to divorce her). The only Jewish women who flouted this law were aristocrats like Herodias (6:17), who paid more attention to Greek custom than to Jewish custom. Mark, who writes for readers living where wives could divorce their husbands, brings out the implications of Jesus' teaching for them too. (Like modern preachers, ancient writers had the liberty to paraphrase sayings to bring out their meanings.)

## 10:13–16

### Images of the Kingdom

**10:13.** Children were loved but were socially powerless; the high infant mortality rate meant that they were physically powerless as well, many dying before attaining maturity. (In the poorest places, like Egypt, perhaps half of those born died by the age of twelve. Poorer Gentile families often discarded babies if they thought they could not support them.) Eager to get on with the business of setting up the kingdom, the disciples have little time for people who do not wield political power.

**10:14–15.** Some thought that the kingdom would be achieved by force of arms; others, by radical moral reform, and so on. But although Jewish people (unlike Greeks) respected humility, no one expected the kingdom to come by becoming powerless like children. The totally powerless can depend on no one but God.

**10:16.** In Genesis some of the patriarchs conferred blessings by the laying on of hands (Gen

48:14), and their prayers were answered. We may be sure that these children were truly blessed.

### **10:17–31**

#### **A Rich Man and the Kingdom**

**10:17.** A pious man customarily sought out his own teacher; a man of wealth could normally find the best or most popular teacher for himself. For a man of wealth to bow before a teacher indicated tremendous respect. We know that at least some disciples asked their teachers questions like the one this rich man asks Jesus. To “inherit eternal life” meant to share in the life of the coming world, the life of the kingdom of God.

**10:18–19.** Without denying that he himself is good, Jesus reminds the man of the standard Jewish conception of God’s goodness (others could be good, but no one compared with God); he then lists select commandments from the Old Testament (five from the Ten Commandments) dealing with human relations (rather than directly with God) that people could test (not, for instance, a prohibition against a sin of the heart, coveting).

**10:20.** If only God is good, the man will have to admit he has broken some commandment; but the commandments Jesus had listed were kept by most well-raised, educated Jewish people.

**10:21–22.** Judaism stressed charity heavily, but Jewish teachers did not normally require a prospective disciple to divest himself entirely of funds. Several teachers, especially some radical Greek teachers, made such demands on rich students to see if they would value true teaching above their wealth; a few rich persons would give up their goods, but most disappointed such teachers.

**10:23–24.** Jesus turns the social order upside down. The well-to-do were often hailed for their generosity (they had more to give); being less educated in the law, the poor were sometimes seen as less pious (although poverty itself was certainly not seen as a sign of impiety, especially by the poor themselves).

**10:25.** This image reflects a Jewish figure of speech for doing something impossible (a large animal going through a needle’s eye). The saying, a hyperbole, refers to a literal needle. (Those who think Jesus refers here to a gate in Jerusalem called the “eye of a needle” are mistaken, because that gate was built in medieval times.) A wealthy person could relinquish wealth only by God’s grace (10:26–27).

**10:26–30.** Most of Jesus’ disciples had not been poor (being fishermen and tax gatherers) but had abandoned their economic position to follow him. Their reward would be found in believers sharing possessions as a family in this world (cf. 6:10; Mt 10:42; Acts 2:44–45) and receiving the life of the kingdom in the world to come.

**10:31.** Most Jewish people understood that the day of judgment would turn things upside down; those who appear great in this world will be nothing in the next, and those who were nothing in this world will be great in the next. Jewish people applied this principle to the exaltation of Israel over the other nations, the oppressed righteous over their wicked oppressors, but Jesus applies it also to individual rank and status.

### **10:32–34**

#### **Third Passion Prediction**

**10:32.** Despite their expectation of the coming kingdom, the disciples recognize the danger of going to Jerusalem and confronting the high priestly aristocracy there. Perhaps they are aware of Jewish traditions about a terrible war preceding the final establishing of the Messiah’s kingdom—a war in which the Jerusalem aristocracy would prove as evil as the Romans (cf. the Dead Sea Scrolls). Or perhaps they trust the Jerusalem leaders but fear the Roman garrison in Jerusalem.

**10:33–34.** Jesus warns against both the Jewish aristocracy and the Romans, who will execute him in the manner customary for revolutionaries. On the suffering Son of Man, see comment on 9:31.

### **10:35–45**

#### **The Greatest Is the Servant**

**10:35–37.** James and John want the status of viceroys in an earthly kingdom; this desire again reflects a popular conception of the Messiah and God’s kingdom that Jesus has repeatedly repudiated (see comment on 8:31–38).

**10:38.** Jesus elsewhere refers to the cross as his cup (14:23–24, 36), which may allude to the

cup of judgment that appears often in the Old Testament (Ps 60:3; 75:8; Is 51:17–23; Jer 25:15–29; 49:12; Lam 4:21; Zech 12:2). His baptism in some way also prefigures his death (see comment on Mk 1:11; cf. Lk 12:50; Ps 69:2, 14–15).

**10:39–40.** The positions on either side of a king's throne (especially the right side) were the most prestigious in a kingdom. But Jesus may be alluding instead to those crucified on his right and his left (15:27). James was later the first of the twelve martyred (Acts 12:2), but according to church tradition John lived into the nineties.

**10:41–42.** Jewish people knew well the Gentile model of authority: ancient near Eastern kings had long claimed to be gods and ruled tyrannically; Greek rulers had adopted the same posture through much of the eastern Mediterranean. The Roman emperor and his provincial agents (who often showed little concern for Jewish sensitivities) would have been viewed in much the same light: brutal and tyrannical. Jesus' reminding the disciples that seeking power was a Gentile (i.e., pagan) practice was tantamount to telling them they should not be doing it; Jewish teachers used Gentile practices as negative examples.

**10:43–44.** It was radical for Jesus to define greatness in terms of servanthood; despite Jewish rules requiring that slaves be well treated, Jewish free persons, like their Gentile counterparts, considered slaves socially inferior.

**10:45.** By calling himself a "servant" and defining his mission as "giving his life a ransom for the many," Jesus identifies himself with the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:10–12 (despite the contrary view of some interpreters today). Although the servant's mission had been given to Israel as a whole (Is 41:8; 43:10; 44:2, 21; 49:3), Israel through disobedience could not fulfill it (42:19), so that the one who would fulfill it had to restore Israel as well as bring light to the Gentiles (49:5–7; 52:13–53:12). Because hardly anyone else had yet applied this passage to the Messiah, Jesus is trying to redefine their expectation about his messianic mission. On the "many" see comment on Romans 5:15.

## **10:46–52**

### **Stopping for a Blind Beggar**

The disciples want to get on with the business of setting up the kingdom (10:37; 11:9–10), not understanding that stopping for a blind beggar is the sort of thing Jesus' kingdom is all about.

**10:46.** The blind, the lame and others who could not engage in the traditional occupations of the day could support themselves only by begging, normally on a busy roadside. Judaism considered it righteous to help them. Jericho was a prosperous town with a good climate, and Timaeus's son no doubt received adequate support there.

**10:47–48.** Except for what they had learned from listening to others recite, blind people in that time were illiterate in the law (Braille had not been invented yet, so they could not read). They were thus not respected as religious persons, although they were protected under the law of Moses. They were also socially powerless, and Jesus' followers view this blind man's loud pleas as an intrusion, the way they had viewed the children (10:13). The disciples may have viewed Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem as a royal procession, and it was foolhardy and impudent to interrupt a royal procession.

**10:49–52.** By "stopping" and standing still, Jesus allows the blind man to come to where Jesus' voice had last sounded. The "cloak" (10:50) is an outer garment, used as a coat in cold weather and as bedding at night, and might have been spread before him for use in his daytime begging if he had no pouch. On the narrative level, the act of casting it aside may signify his forsaking dependence on anything else and trusting only in Jesus.

## **11:1–11**

### **Jesus Enters Jerusalem**

Although later Jewish teachers understood "the king coming on a donkey" (Zech 9:9) messianically, it is not clear that the whole crowd understands Jesus' claim to messiahship here. Had members of the Roman garrison been present outside the gates and recognized the implications of Jesus' claim, they would have arrested him.

**11:1–2.** Heralds or messengers were typically sent two by two (6:7; cf. 14:13). That Jesus chooses a colt over a grown donkey reinforces Mark's portrayal of his humility.

**11:3.** Residents of the area around Jerusalem had to be particularly hospitable with their property around Passover season, when Jewish pilgrims from the whole ancient world came for the feast. The response to the potential question could have meant, "Lend these to Jesus, the teacher" (Aramaic *rab* can be translated as "master" or "lord"), or "Lend these to the service of

God.”

**11:4–6.** In many cities, the doors of homes faced a courtyard shared by neighbors; in a small village, the doorway may have just faced a dirt road through the town. People would normally ride the adult, not the colt never before ridden, so the disciples’ purpose in untying the colt may not have been immediately obvious even had they owned it themselves.

**11:7–8.** The spreading of garments represents royal homage (2 Kings 9:13). Branches were also waved in homage to rulers (cf. 1 Macc 13:51; 2 Macc 10:7). The larger palm branches used for the Feast of Tabernacles (in the fall) would not be available at Passover time (in the spring), unless brought from Jericho; the branches described here are small enough for the colt to walk on. (Carrying branches was also part of the worship at the feast depicted in Ps 118:27.)

Pilgrims to the feast were typically welcomed by crowds already there, so it is unlikely that the whole crowd recognized the significance of Jesus’ entry. In view of the crowd’s acclamation in 11:10, however, the image that may have come most readily to the minds of Mark’s ancient readers is probably that of a royal entrance procession.

**11:9.** “Hosanna” means “O save!” and both this and the next line of verse 9 come from Psalm 118:25–26. Psalms 113–118, called the Hallel, were regularly sung at Passover season, so these words were fresh in everyone’s minds; hopes for the restoration of the Davidic kingdom also ran high at this time of year.

**11:10.** The coming of the kingdom when David or his descendants would again reign (e.g., Is 9; 11; Jer 23) is here associated with the hope of one coming in the Lord’s name. (David is their “father” in the sense of “deliverer,” not their ancestor: cf. Is 9:6; 2 Kings 13:14.) Passover commemorated God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt; consequently, Jewish hopes for a future deliverance from their current problems ran high during this season, and Rome had troops in Jerusalem ready in case riot control became necessary. By treating Jesus as the object of any of these hopes, the crowds are beginning to see in this teacher a possible messianic figure who could lead them against the Romans.

**11:11.** The ancient workday began at sunrise; the “evening” offering in the temple was what we call afternoon (about 3 p.m.). “Late” may mean not “dark” but rather that the daily activity in the temple had begun to subside.

## **11:12–25**

### **The Temple and the Tree: Judgment Coming**

Jesus’ prophetic act against the temple is enclosed by the story of his cursing the fig tree, also an acted parable of judgment. Fig trees were one of the most common kinds of trees in Palestine.

**11:12–14.** At this time of year, edible figs were still about six weeks away, but the bland fruit had recently appeared on the tree in late March; they would become ripe by late May. These were the early figs that preceded the main crop of late figs, which were ripe for harvest from mid–August into October. If only leaves appeared, without the early figs, that tree would bear no figs that year—early or late. Because everyone would know that it was “not yet the season for [real] figs,” Jesus is making a point about trees that only pretend to have good fruit (cf. Jer 24). In some Jewish stories, exceptionally holy men could curse others or objects and so destroy them; Jesus exerts genuine authority to curse only here, as an acted parable to his disciples.

**11:15.** Jewish people from other parts of the empire or even from different towns in Galilee would have local currencies that needed to be converted to some standard for use in the temple. Further, one was not to bring sacrifices from long distances but to follow the more convenient prescription of Moses’ law: buy the sacrifices in Jerusalem. Moneychangers and sellers of doves were thus necessary and in some sense biblical. The issue is not whether there should have been moneychangers; it is whether it was valid to turn much of the outer court into a place emphasizing commerce rather than worship. With hundreds of thousands of pilgrims at Passover, the merchants’ strip in the temple must have been quite large; disturbing a significant portion of this business would have attracted everyone’s attention.

**11:16.** Later rabbinic law also warned against defiling the temple courts by carrying unnecessary items through them, but no one protested as strongly as Jesus does, and no one seems to have questioned the necessity of commercial activity in the outer court at a feast.

**11:17.** Jesus cites two texts as the basis for his attack. The first is Isaiah 56:7. God’s house was intended to be for all peoples (1 Kings 8:41–43; Is 56:7), and in the Old Testament the only separation in the temple was between priests and people. But in Jesus’ day the temple was also segregated by race and gender for purity reasons, with Jewish women on a lower level outside the Court of Israel and non-Jews in the outermost court. Jesus shows his concern for the

worship of the Gentiles and protests racial segregation in a religious institution.

The second text he cites is from Jeremiah 7:11, where Jeremiah condemns the idea that the temple is a safe haven for Judah in its sin; although those who have exploited the poor think that the temple will protect them, God will destroy his temple (Jer 7:3–15). Robbers' "dens" were where robbers kept their loot; in A.D. 66 rebel brigands or "robbers" (for whom Josephus uses the same term as Mark) took possession of the temple and slaughtered the priests, further inviting God's impending wrath (see comment on Mk 13:14).

**11:18.** Knowing the priestly aristocracy, one can easily recognize that they saw in Jesus' attack on the temple establishment a threat to their own economic and social interests. Their position in relation to both the Romans and their own people depended in large measure on their authority and keeping order in the temple.

**11:19.** Jerusalem was too crowded at Passover season to accommodate all the pilgrims during this period, though the pilgrims would seek to eat the Passover meal itself within the city's walls.

**11:20–24.** Some Jewish texts speak of "removing mountains" as an infinitely long or virtually impossible task, accomplished only by the most pious (the rabbis applied it to mastering studies that appeared humanly impossible to master). Thus Jesus is saying that nothing will be too hard for the person of faith. The image of God's Spirit bringing down a mountain before a faithful servant also appears in Zechariah 4:6–7 (where the faithful one is the anointed king). The promise of one's commands coming to pass probably presupposes Spirit-inspired speech (cf., e.g., 2 Kings 2:21–22; 4:3–7, 41–44; Lam 3:37; Acts 3:6, 16).

**11:25.** Standing (often with uplifted hands) was the normal posture for prayer; kneeling was much rarer.

### **11:27–33**

#### **By Whose Authority?**

**11:27–28.** As guardians of the temple and the status quo with the Romans, the chief priests would see Jesus' act as a direct challenge to their authority.

**11:29–30.** Here Jesus argues that his authority and John's derive from the same source, from "heaven" (one Jewish way of saying "God"). This argument follows the Jewish legal principle that a commissioned messenger acts on the full authority of the one who sent him. If John's authority were merely human (cf. Deut 18:20; Jer 23:16), they should have taken a firmer stand against him (Deut 13:1–11); if it was divine, God would hold them to account for not having listened (Deut 18:18–19).

**11:31–32.** The chief priests were politicians—less popular than the politically powerless Pharisees—who had to balance the interests of both their people and the Roman authorities. Thus they had to keep popular opinion in mind when making decisions that might incur the displeasure of the people (11:32).

**11:33.** Counterquestion (11:29) was a legitimate means of debate; their withdrawal from the rules of debate rhetorically frees Jesus from the responsibility to continue in dialogue with them.

### **12:1–12**

#### **The Greedy Tenant Farmers**

Jesus still addresses those who fancy themselves rulers of Israel, reminding them that they are merely custodians appointed by God (like the shepherds of Jer 23 and Ezek 34) over his vineyard.

Much of the rural Roman Empire, including parts of Galilee, was controlled by wealthy landowners, whose land was worked by tenant farmers. Landowners had great status in society, whereas tenant farmers had little except, perhaps, among their own peers.

**12:1.** Here Jesus describes a normal way to prepare a vineyard, but he clearly alludes to Isaiah 5:1–2, where Israel is the vineyard. Some Jewish interpreters by the time of Jesus saw Isaiah 5 as a prediction of the temple's destruction in 586 B.C.; if such an allusion was in the mind of any of Jesus' hearers, it would communicate his warning all the more forcefully.

According to the most likely reconstructions, the "wall" was a rugged stone hedge, and the vat was a pit into which juice would run when workers trod down newly picked grapes. The top of the "watchtower" was a sentry post against intruders, but the building itself, probably a crude hut, undoubtedly also housed workers during harvest season.

**12:2.** Payments were rendered at harvest time, often one-quarter to as much as one-half the

produce.

**12:3–5.** Landowners always had power, socially and legally, to enforce their will on the tenants; a few reportedly even had hired assassins to deal with troublesome tenants. Here the tenants act as if they are the ones with power, and they exploit it mercilessly (as opposed to the ideal of a *benevolent* landowner). Their behavior fits the Jewish tradition that Israel martyred many of the prophets God sent.

**12:6.** In the light of 1:11 and 9:7, the “beloved son” clearly represents Jesus and probably alludes to Genesis 22:2, where similar Hebrew words were used by Jewish readers to emphasize the pathos involved in Abraham’s willingness to give up his precious son Isaac.

**12:7–8.** The tenants presume too much about the inheritance; although they could have seized it under certain legal conditions, the owner could also stipulate—and after their misdeeds certainly would—that someone else inherit the vineyard; or representatives of the emperor could have seized it. The story paints the tenants as more wicked and stupid than one would expect any *real* tenants to be; but it is transparent that the tenants represent the religious leaders who serve themselves rather than God (12:12).

**12:9.** The ancient hearers would wonder why the landowner had not come and thrown out the tenants earlier.

**12:10–12.** This text is from Psalm 118:22–23, part of the Hallel, like 118:25–26 cited in Mark 11:9–10. The building referred to is the temple (Ps 118:18–21, 25–27); as the cornerstone of a new temple, Jesus is a threat to the builders of the old one.

### **12:13–17** **Caesar and God**

Rabbis dealt with questions concerning legal, moral and exegetical issues as well as mocking questions posed by opponents (e.g., Sadducees, Gentiles, apostates and schismatics). Parallels to these basic categories of questions appear in Mark 12:13–37, where Jesus’ answers prove him a proficient rabbi.

**12:13.** Pharisees tended to be nationalistic, whereas Herodians were clients of Herod, the Roman vassal; they worked together only in extraordinary situations. Pharisees would be concerned about Jewish legal requirements to have witnesses for a charge but would be ready to investigate charges concerning Jesus’ disloyalty to the law. That they would try to test his teaching here is not surprising. The Herodians, who hoped for a restoration of Herodian rule in Judea (which Pilate currently governed), were naturally disturbed by messianic figures who challenged their idea of Herodian rule and might cause Rome to tighten its direct control over the land.

**12:14–15.** They pit the obligations of peace with Rome against the nationalistic, messianic fervor that they assume Jesus has generated; a disastrous tax revolt two decades earlier had shown where such fervor could lead. If he publicly takes the view characterized by those later called Zealots (no king but God), he can be arrested; if he rejects that view (which he does), he may compromise his following.

**12:16–17.** Jewish Palestine circulated copper coins that omitted the image of the deified emperor, which was offensive to Jewish tastes. (Although King Agrippa later used both the image of the emperor and his own, Herod Antipas, current ruler in Galilee, avoided any images on his coins, and so did local Jewish coinage.) But Jesus’ opponents have a silver denarius—which bore the emperor’s image—available when he requests one. They are therefore hardly in a position to challenge his lack of nationalistic zeal.

### **12:18–27** **Sadducees and the Resurrection**

**12:18.** One of the basic points of contention between Pharisees and Sadducees was that the latter did not accept the future resurrection of the bodies of the dead.

**12:19.** The Sadducees’ question to Jesus concerns the custom called levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–6), which was meant to protect widows economically. It is practiced in many societies where women are not permitted to earn wages.

**12:20–23.** The Sadducees probably take this story line from the Jewish book of Tobit, where seven husbands of pious Sarah die one after the other.

**12:24–27.** Jesus’ response resembles standard Pharisaic responses. When Pharisees debated this issue with Sadducees, they argued for the resurrection from the law of Moses; they typically read a text for all they could get out of it. Standard Jewish interpretive technique would have

read Exodus 3:6 as present tense, “I *am* the God of the patriarchs”—implying that the patriarchs still lived. Phrases like “in the passage about the bush” were standard, because the Bible had not yet been divided into chapters and verses.

## **12:28–34**

### **The Love Commandments**

**12:28.** Rabbis would often discuss the question of which commandments were heavier (i.e., more important) and which were lighter.

**12:29–34.** Following Jewish interpretive technique, Jesus links the two commandments (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18) by a common key word, “love.” These passages were also linked in Jewish tradition (e.g., Philo), and some other teachers felt that these were the greatest commandments that summarized the law. This was especially true of “Love the Lord your God,” which followed directly on and applied the basic confession of Judaism, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord ... is one” (Deut 6:4). That many of Jesus’ hearers would recognize the truth of his reply makes it all the more difficult to dispute with him on the matter.

## **12:35–37**

### **David’s Lord**

When Jewish teachers challenged their hearers to resolve apparent discrepancies in Scripture, they assumed that both texts were true (in this case, Jesus knows that he is both David’s son and David’s Lord) and were asking how to harmonize them. Jesus’ opponents apparently have no answer, because Jewish interpreters did not apply Psalm 110:1 to the Messiah.

**12:35.** By definition, the Christ, or anointed one, was the royal descendant of David (Is 9:7; 11:1; Ps 2; 89; 132). But this view of messiahship lent itself to a revolutionary view of the kingdom (see Mk 11:10) and was thus inadequate by itself.

**12:36–37.** The one who would reign in God’s kingdom was David’s “lord,” not merely his descendant; he would thus be greater than the resurrected David. Writing in Greek, Mark may want his readers to connect this verse (Ps 110:1) with a verse he has cited in the preceding section, because Jewish interpreters often linked verses with a key word—there was only one Lord: God (Mk 12:29). If so, Mark makes a claim for Jesus’ deity here (cf. 1:3).

## **12:38–44**

### **The Pious Poor and Their Religious Oppressors**

**12:38.** Like their Greek counterparts, some Jewish teachers wore a special identifying garb; this seems to have been a long, white linen robe, similar to those of priests and temple officials. Teachers were normally greeted with titles of honor; marketplaces, which were full of people, would provide many opportunities for these teachers to receive such recognition.

**12:39.** Synagogues were not all of the same shape or size, but in many later synagogues, teachers could take a seat in full view of most of the rest of the assembly (like ministers in most churches today). What is significant is their status in a status-conscious society; synagogues were the most important assembly places for the community. At banquets, those seated nearest the host were in positions of honor; ancient literature is full of complaints from those snubbed by being given socially inferior seats.

**12:40.** Widows had little means of support, were socially powerless and honorless in a society emphasizing status and honor, and were to be protected under Jewish law.

Jesus could mean that these teachers exploit widows’ resources by seeking extensive tithes (which they could set at 20–30 percent, on top of the heavy land taxes levied by the government); or he could mean that they follow the letter of the law in legal decisions rather than showing mercy to the poor. Whatever their specific crime, the charge of “devouring widows’ houses” portrays them as worse than tax gatherers.

They may have lingered long in their individual prayers in the synagogues; it is not the longevity of prayers but the motive of this longevity that Jesus criticizes here. Like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus sees social injustice and religious hypocrisy as inextricably linked (e.g., Amos 2:7; 8:5–6), and he stands on behalf of the economically powerless (Is 1:17).

**12:41–44.** A later tradition claims that thirteen receptacles for such gifts stood in the Court of Women, accessible to Israelite women as well as to men. The temple sported ostentatious wealth, and its officials would probably waste this widow’s money; but this powerless woman, ignorant of that likelihood, acts in good faith and is the greatest giver in God’s sight. The

widow would not starve, given provisions for the poor in Jewish synagogues (cf. comment on Acts 6:1–4). The widow’s “mite,” or *lepton*, represented the lightest and least valuable coin of the period.

### **13:1–4**

#### **Setting of Jesus’ End-Time Discourse**

Mark could have gotten in serious trouble with the Roman authorities for writing this chapter; Jewish underground tracts about the time of the end usually included Israel’s exaltation, and Rome distrusted any threat to its power. But this chapter before Jesus’ arrest climaxes Jesus’ warnings to his disciples in Mark: true followers must be ready to follow to the cross and share his sufferings.

**13:1.** Greek texts often portray Greek philosophical teachers conversing with their disciples while strolling about; this may have been a common teaching technique.

The temple complex consisted of many buildings and was one of the largest, most magnificent structures in the ancient world; it was twice the size of Solomon’s temple. Construction had begun under Herod the Great before Jesus’ birth and was still continuing at this time. Jewish people all over the world contributed to the temple, and so much was received that officials kept adding on to a golden vine that was part of its ostentatious glory. It was sacred to Herod’s enemies as well as to his allies.

**13:2.** In A.D. 70, the Romans destroyed the temple. The wording here is only slightly hyperbolic: some stones remained in place, but most of the temple was obliterated. As exemplified in the Dead Sea Scrolls, some other groups also expected God to judge the temple authorities; but no one before A.D. 66 was as accurate concerning the timing as Jesus was (13:30).

**13:3–4.** Although Greek teachers often instructed their pupils while walking, they also often instructed them while sitting in front of a temple. The disciples question to Jesus about the sign of the temple’s destruction sets the scene for Jesus’ answer in the rest of the chapter, in which he describes both the imminent end of the Jerusalemites’ world and the ultimate end of the age.

### **13:5–8**

#### **Not Yet the End**

**13:5–6.** False messiahs were common and often drew significant Jewish followings in Palestine as late as Bar Kochba, whom Rabbi Akiba hailed as the Messiah around A.D. 130.

**13:7–8.** Ancient Jewish prophecy teachers usually listed these events among the signs of the end; the end was often portrayed as preceded by great sufferings or a final war, and was sometimes compared with birth pangs. Jesus says that instead these events characterize normal life until the end; history until the final time is only the *beginning* of birth pangs.

### **13:9–13**

#### **Sufferings to Expect Before the End**

**13:9.** Before A.D. 70, local courts, or councils deciding cases, were probably run by local elders or priests; in later times rabbis would staff them. Synagogues were the local places of public assembly and thus provided the natural place for hearings and public discipline. Sometimes discipline was administered in the form of flogging; under second-century rules, this meant thirteen harsh strokes on the breast and twenty-six on the back; the smiter was to strike as hard as possible. These words would have particularly pained Jewish Christians, because they signified rejection among their own people.

**13:10.** In context, this preaching will be carried out before officials of all nations (“kings”—v. 9—could refer just to Rome’s vassal princes, but “all nations” suggests that Parthian and other rulers from the East are also in view), indicating virtually universal persecution.

**13:11.** Jewish people thought of the Holy Spirit especially as the Spirit of prophecy who had anointed the prophets to speak God’s message.

**13:12.** See Micah 7:5–7 (more explicit in Mt 10:35–36).

### **13:14–23**

#### **The Prerequisite for the End**

About a decade after Jesus uttered these words, his disciples had good reason to remember them. When the Roman emperor Caligula declared himself divine and tried to set up his image in the Jerusalem temple (A.D. 39), Jesus' sayings about the impending abomination that would cause desolation must have been circulated with renewed vigor. These sayings were available to Paul a decade later (2 Thess 2:1–12) and to Mark when he wrote his Gospel (perhaps A.D. 64). The abomination that would bring about desolation was finally fulfilled in A.D. 66–70.

**13:14.** Josephus, who lived through the war of 66–70, thought the “abomination of desolation” (the reference is to Dan 9:27; cf. 11:31; 12:11) happened in A.D. 66, when Zealots shed the blood of priests in the temple. Others date the abomination of desolation three and one-half years later, in 70. The Jerusalemites had considered it a sacrilege for the Roman standards, which bore the image of the worshiped emperor, to enter Jerusalem. But in the year 70, when the temple was destroyed, the Romans erected these standards over the desolate site of the temple. Both views may be true: if the phrase means “abomination that *causes* desolation,” then the abomination of A.D. 66 may have led to the desolation of A.D. 70.

The mountains were full of caves and represented the safest place to flee; both David and the second-century B.C. Jewish revolutionaries, the Maccabees, had earlier practiced guerrilla warfare from them, and Jewish refugees hid there in the war of A.D. 132–135. It is reported that the Jerusalem Christians, warned by prophecies before Jerusalem's fall, fled to a place called Pella, hewn from foothills far to the north.

**13:15.** Housetops were flat and used for prayer, drying vegetables and so forth. Because one approached them by an outdoor staircase, one who fled in haste would descend without entering the house to retrieve any possessions.

**13:16.** Workers would wear their outer coats in the cool of the early morning but leave them on the edge of the field as the day grew warmer. This exhortation again indicates haste.

**13:17.** The difficulties of bearing or nursing a child under these circumstances are obvious in any culture, especially to mothers. Mothers often nursed their babies for the first two years of life. The text may also indicate grief over the loss of the children (cf. 2 Baruch 10:13–15).

**13:18.** In addition to the colder nights and rains, in winter the dry Judean creek beds were filled without warning with rainwater from the hills, and they became difficult to cross. Josephus wrote of a group of Jewish fugitives from Jerusalem who were delayed by the recently flooded Jordan in the spring of 68 and as a consequence were slaughtered by Roman soldiers.

**13:19.** Daniel 11 ends with Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C., and the final distress to which no other tribulation could be compared (12:1) seems to occur at that time, to be followed by the resurrection of the dead (12:2). But sometimes events in Israel's history (like the promise to Abraham or the conquest of Canaan) were deferred, and Daniel 9:24–27 better fits a date in the first century A.D. than in the time of Antiochus.

Jesus' addition of “never shall be” (Joel 2:2) to Daniel's “such as never occurred” suggests that other tribulations after 66–70 could follow in history.

**13:20.** “The days” refers presumably to Daniel's 1,260 days; given the severity of sufferings, the full period was too long to permit survivors.

**13:21–23.** False prophets and false messiahs had gained Jewish followings all through this period and usually challenged the authority of Rome, leading to the death of their followers. Some such prophets continued claiming that God would deliver Jerusalem up to their slaughter by the Romans at the fall of Jerusalem. After the temple's demise, hopes for the Messiah's coming were presumably even more intense.

## **13:24–27**

### **The End of This World**

**13:24–25.** Here Jesus uses the language of the end (Is 13:10; 34:4; cf. 24:23; Ezek 32:7–8). Sometimes this cataclysmic language was used for historical events (the Sibylline Oracles use it for an earthquake; cf. Jer 4:20–28), but usually ancient literature reserves it for the end or transformation of the present world order and the establishing of God's eternal kingdom.

As in Daniel, the end Jesus predicted seems to have been deferred; the temple was destroyed just as Jesus predicted, but he did not then return. Because Old Testament prophecies blended together events according to the kind of event rather than the time they would occur, Jesus likely means that the end would follow the temple's destruction and the ensuing tribulation; hence the end remains imminent.

**13:26.** Jesus describes the Son of Man in terms that Jewish literature usually reserved for God (coming in glory, sending his angels). The text clearly alludes to Daniel 7:13–14, where “one like a son of man” (i.e., like a human being) receives the kingdom from God. This Son of Man

functions as a representative on behalf of Israel, who in the same context suffers and also receives the right to rule the world (7:25–27).

**13:27.** One of the most prominent features of Jewish future expectation was the regathering of the dispersed tribes of Israel. (Mark probably means the dispersion of believers in Jesus here; cf. 2 Thess 2:1).

### **13:28–31**

#### **The End Is Imminent**

**13:28–29.** The signs Jesus lists show that the end is imminent, just as a fig tree's leaves show what season it is: because fig trees lack smaller branches they appear barren in winter, but they bloom in late March and are ideal for shade in the summer. This image could refer back to Jesus' acted-out parable with a fig tree, implying the imminent destruction of the temple (see comment on 11:12–25).

**13:30.** The length of generations varied but was often represented in the Old Testament by forty years (in the Dead Sea Scrolls, forty years represents the suffering of the final generation). Jesus speaks these words near A.D. 30; the temple would be destroyed in A.D. 70.

**13:31.** Others also noted that it was easier for heaven and earth to pass than for God to forget his covenant or his words (e.g., Jer 31:35–37). Here Jesus speaks of his own words in the same manner.

### **13:32–37**

#### **The Time of the End Is Unknown**

**13:32–34.** Other Jewish teachers also told parables of kings or householders going away and returning to find spouse or servants faithful or unfaithful. First-century readers heard enough stories about such events (including in the Bible—Prov 7:19–20) to relate to the image well. Slaves held many different roles, but the doorkeeper's role was a prominent one, because he held the master's keys, kept out unwanted visitors and checked other slaves leaving the premises. But with the relative prestige of the doorkeeper's position (some were married to freedwomen) came great responsibility as well.

**13:35.** The times of night which Jesus mentions represent the Roman division of the night into four watches, Jesus' only guarantee being that he will come at night while the servant is posted on guard duty. In most of the ancient Mediterranean a rooster's final crowing could function like a modern alarm clock, signalling the advent of dawn; but in this context it refers to the "watch" by that name, the quarter of the night after midnight (see comment on 14:30, 72).

Because the roads were infested with robbers, one would not expect the master to travel at night when it was unnecessary. Thus a slave could be caught off guard if the master returned at night.

**13:36–37.** Falling asleep at one's guard post would lead to punishment.

### **14:1–11**

#### **Anointed for Burial**

**14:1.** Jewish literature reports that many high priests bullied those who opposed them. Thus they would certainly not tolerate someone who said that God had directed him to attack their temple cult or who threatened impending judgment on its unwatchful servants.

**14:2.** Jerusalem was crowded during the feast, with perhaps five times its usual population. Riots were known to occur; Josephus reported that at one Passover several decades after the events of this verse, thirty thousand persons were crushed or trampled. Thus extra Roman troops were garrisoned in Jerusalem during the feast, and the Roman governor came from Caesarea to be on hand in case of trouble. The danger of arresting Jesus at the feast (i.e., during the festal time, in public) reflects an important concern for the temple leadership.

**14:3.** Bethany was one of those villages near Jerusalem where Passover pilgrims could spend the night with hosts. One "sat" at normal meals; one "reclined" on couches at special meals like feasts or banquets. If Simon had been a "leper" (nicknames usually had some basis but were not always meant literally; e.g., a tall family was nicknamed the "Goliaths"), he was certainly not one by this point; no one would have joined him for dinner if he had been. Jesus may have healed him.

**14:4–5.** It was customary to anoint the heads of important guests, but this woman's action is extreme. Whatever her economic status, this perfume (an oil from a root probably imported

from India or South Arabia) was worth a year of a common laborer's wages; her family had probably kept it as a status symbol. Its fragrance was preserved by sealing it in alabaster (the favored container for perfume), and once the flask was broken its contents had to be used immediately. Her anointing of Jesus represents a major sacrifice and indicates the depth of her love, but given the great numbers of landless or tenant-farming peasants, some people present think the worth of the perfume could have been put to better use.

**14:6–7.** Jesus' reply probably contains an allusion to Deuteronomy 15:11, which urges generosity to the poor, who will always be in the land. He does not play down giving to the poor; rather he plays up what follows.

**14:8–9.** In Jewish tradition kings (including, by definition, the Messiah, or "anointed one"), priests and others had to be anointed for service. But Jesus here stresses a different kind of anointing, which the woman undoubtedly had not intended: anointing a body for burial. This woman's act of love was the only anointing Jesus would receive (16:1).

**14:10–11.** Judas could easily locate the chief priests, although they would not have been accessible to him had his mission been less in line with their plans. His mercenary motives would have appeared as vile to ancient readers as they do to us, and they contrast with the behavior of the unnamed woman of 14:1–9.

## **14:12–26**

### **The New Passover and the Betrayer**

**14:12.** By this period the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which immediately followed Passover, had been extended in popular parlance to include the Passover itself. Representatives from each family would have the priests slaughter a lamb for them in the temple, then return with it to feed the whole family that night.

**14:13.** Many commentators point out that water jars (as opposed to wineskins) were nearly always carried by women; a man carrying one would therefore be a noticeable sign. Households that could afford slaves always had them carry the water; in many cities, servants were sent to the public fountains to bring rainwater that had been stored in cisterns.

**14:14–16.** Anyone with a two-story house, the second story containing a "large" upper room, would be considered well-to-do. This family presumably resided in the area of Jerusalem known as the Upper City, near the temple, rather than the poorer Lower City, downwind of Jerusalem's sewage. Because the Passover had to be eaten within Jerusalem's walls, most homes would be crowded with guests; but the accommodations for Jesus' last meal with his disciples would be quite adequate.

**14:17.** The Passover was to be eaten at night. April's sundown in Jerusalem came by 6 p.m., so the meal could have started then. Table fellowship was intimate at the feast; one or two families normally shared the meal, but here Jesus and his closest disciples make up a family.

**14:18–20.** That someone "dipping in the bowl" (dipping bowls were especially used at Passover as part of the ritual) with a person would betray that person would have horrified ancient readers, who saw hospitality and the sharing of table fellowship as an intimate bond (cf. Ps 41:9, cited in Jn 13:18). Some scholars have also suggested that someone dipping "with" Jesus could mean that the person was denying Jesus' superior rank, because many Jewish groups required the leader to act (hence to dip) first (see the Dead Sea Scrolls; cf. Ecclus 31:18).

**14:21.** Most of Judaism acknowledged both God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

**14:22.** The head of the household customarily gave thanks for the bread and wine before any meal, but special blessings were said over bread and wine at the Passover meal (though probably not in quite the same form as became standard later). Jewish people broke rather than cut their bread. We should not understand "This is my body" literally (in Aramaic the phrasing would be ambiguous: "is" or "represents" would not be distinguished), just as we do not take literally the standard Jewish interpretation spoken over the Passover bread: "This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate when they came from Egypt." (Taken literally, that bread would have been centuries old, and it had already been eaten.)

**14:23.** Four cups of red wine came to be used in the Passover meal; if they were in use by the first century, this cup may be the fourth, which followed the blessing of the bread. (Other scholars have suggested that the third cup is in view. By the end of the first century the four cups seem to have been both Jewish and Greco-Roman practice at feasts.) Each person did not have an individual cup; they customarily passed around one cup.

**14:24.** Covenants were ratified by the blood of sacrifice; God had redeemed his people from Egypt by the blood of the Passover lamb; "on behalf of the many" probably alludes to Isaiah 53 (see comment on Mk 10:45). Passover ritual interpreted the cup but did not interpret it as

blood, because Jewish law and custom were revolted by the idea of drinking any creature's blood—especially human blood.

**14:25.** Vows of abstinence were common in Palestinian Judaism: "I will not eat any such and such until this happens," or "I vow that I will not use this until that happens." Jesus apparently vows not to drink wine again until the kingdom comes, and he perhaps abstains from the fourth cup. Jewish tradition commonly portrayed the time of the kingdom as a banquet, when the Bible had promised an unending supply of wine (Amos 9:13). Jewish blessings over the wine called it "the fruit of the vine."

**14:26.** After the meal, it was customary to sing psalms from the Hallel, which consisted of Psalms 113–118. The walk to the Mount of Olives took at least fifteen minutes.

#### **14:27–31**

##### **Other Betrayers Predicted**

**14:27.** Here Jesus cites Zechariah 13:7, which is not clearly messianic; Jesus may refer to the principle it reports: a flock is scattered without the shepherd to guide them. (The Dead Sea Scrolls do, however, apply this text to the future time.)

**14:28.** Jewish people in this period were not expecting a resurrection of a given person distinct from the resurrection of the whole nation. Further, they certainly would not have expected a migration to Galilee to follow it: God's people would gather in Jerusalem in the time of the end (cf. Joel 2:32). These expectations may be why the disciples ignore this part of Jesus' statement.

**14:29–31.** Ancient sources typically regarded the rooster as a reliable reporter of the advent of dawn (e.g., the second-century A.D. Roman writer Apuleius in *Metamorphoses* 2.26; 3 Maccabees 5:23; Babylonian Talmud *Berakot* 60b), but commentators report that in Palestine nocturnal crowings are familiar to the night watchmen beginning at 12:30 a.m.; the second was about 1:30 a.m. In either case the point is that the denial is imminent.

#### **14:32–42**

##### **Watchmen Asleep**

**14:32–34.** Jesus and his disciples may have arrived at Gethsemane by 10 or 11 p.m. (which was late in that culture). It was customary to stay awake late on Passover night and to speak of God's redemption. The disciples should have been able to stay awake to keep watch; they had probably stayed up late on nearly every other Passover of their lives.

**14:35–36.** "Abba" is the Aramaic word for "Papa," a term of great intimacy and affectionate respect. It was normally the first word a child would utter, but adults could use it for their fathers as well, and students sometimes used it of their teachers. Perhaps because it implied such intimacy, Jewish people never used it of God (though they did call him a heavenly father) except in an occasional parable by a charismatic teacher. On the cup of judgment see comment on Mark 10:39; Jesus cries to be spared this cup (cf. Ps 116:3–4, 15).

**14:37.** The disciples were to "stand watch" like the porters, the slaves in charge of the door, in the parable in 13:34–36.

**14:38.** "Temptation" here is "testing"; given the common Jewish religious uses of the word, Jesus is saying: "lest you fall prey to the testing you are about to face." The contrast between "spirit" and "body" is not meant in the later Gnostic or Neo-Platonic sense (the soul is good and the body is evil); rather that though one may mean well on impulse (14:31; cf. the use of "spirit" in many cases in Proverbs), the body is susceptible to exhaustion.

**14:39–42.** Jesus' use of "sinners" (v. 41) to refer to the men dispatched by representatives of the Sanhedrin is strong language, especially in view of the way most people would use the word (2:16).

#### **14:43–52**

##### **The Betrayal**

**14:43.** Because they had been sent by prominent men of Jerusalem, the band that comes to arrest Jesus is probably the temple guard. This guard is known to have possessed the weapons mentioned here (swords and clubs); clubs were said to have characterized the corrupt priestly aristocracy in charge of the temple, as well as being useful in controlling rioters. Clubs were not supposed to be carried on holy days, including the Passover festival.

These men come prepared for armed resistance from one they suppose is a messianic revolutionary—because they had interpreted Jesus' act in the temple in terms of the cultural

categories of their day, rather than in terms of the rest of his teaching (14:48).

**14:44–46.** A kiss was a sign of special affection among family members and close friends, or of a disciple's honor and affection for his teacher. Thus Judas's kiss is a special act of hypocrisy (cf. Prov 27:6).

This band believed they needed Judas to lead them in person to the appropriate spot; had they searched for Jesus only on the basis of general directions, their search would have become evident and given Jesus time to escape. The kiss is necessary because darkness made it harder to recognize Jesus; under normal conditions the guards could have recognized him (he had been teaching in the temple).

**14:47.** Being well-to-do, high priests had ample servants. Although the servant mentioned here is probably not a Levite and thus unable to minister in the temple anyway, it is worthy of note that those who were missing appendages such as ears were barred from serving in the sanctuary. (Jesus' disciple is probably *aiming* for the neck or something more substantial than an ear, however.) Although the object of the expedition was only to arrest Jesus, had the sword struck again many of the disciples would likely have been killed in the ensuing conflict.

**14:48–49.** Subversives (e.g., the later assassins who slew Jewish aristocrats under cover of the crowds in the temple) did their acts secretly or so as to avoid capture; Jesus' supposed subversion had been public and unconcealed. An arrest in the temple would have been politically disadvantageous and possibly aroused a riot (cf. comment on 14:1–2).

**14:50–52.** Except for some Jews overwhelmed by Greek culture and considered apostates, Jewish people generally abhorred nakedness. At night, one might have expected the disciple to have an outer garment as well as the linen cloth, and he is probably already chilly (cf. 14:54). (Although one could sleep naked inside one's home in Palestine in April, Jerusalem's higher elevation makes 14:54 a likely indication that it was a cool night; Passover pilgrims who camped outdoors had coverings.) The point is that the man is in a hurry to escape.

#### **14:53–65**

##### **The Sanhedrin's Mock Trial**

This trial breaks a number of Jewish legal rules, if later documents correctly indicate the state of Jewish law in this period. Mark probably knew most of these rules, though many of his readers probably did not.

**14:53.** "Leading priests," "elders" and "scribes" were the three groups represented on the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious court of Israel. The full Sanhedrin, with seventy-one members, normally met in the assembly hall in the temple called the Chamber of Hewn Stone, where they sat in a semicircle with the high priest in the center. In this case, many members of the Sanhedrin (twenty-three members were necessary for a quorum) hold a secret night meeting without advance notice in the high priest's home (14:54), although they are investigating what they will claim is a capital offense.

Such a meeting is illegal on all these counts, although they would no doubt have explained it as only a preliminary inquiry before a real investigation (cf. Lk 22:66). The lack of advance notice could have been excused because it is during a feast and all necessary officials are in town; but because Jewish law forbade trials on the sabbath, they were probably also forbidden on feast days. The officials who gather seem more concerned with convicting Jesus quickly than with legal technicalities.

**14:54.** Peter's trespassing on private property—that of the high priest himself—required serious commitment from a Galilean fisherman. The guards could be the priest's night watchmen, but presumably they would immediately recognize that Peter does not belong there; more likely, these are members of the temple guard, waiting to see the results of the trial inside. Regardless of whether they had been assigned night duties in the temple, they may have planned to stay up late for Passover anyway.

**14:55–56.** Despite the high priest's certainty of Jesus' subversiveness, at least some members of the council, perhaps scribes, follow the virtuous Jewish tradition of diligent cross-examination of witnesses. But once these witnesses had contradicted one another, all understandings of Jewish law unanimously demanded that they be declared false and the case be rejected as contrived; under Jewish law, in a capital case, false witnesses were to be put to death (see Deut 19:16–21 and the Dead Sea Scrolls). Even though Rome had not given the Sanhedrin jurisdiction to execute false witnesses, the Sanhedrin should have at least disciplined them; that the case just goes on demonstrates severe bias among the council members gathered there.

**14:57–59.** Many Jewish people expected that God would establish a new, purified temple at the

time he put down the Romans. Outsiders had naturally misinterpreted Jesus' teaching about a new temple and warning about the old temple's destruction as the threat of a mad, messianic revolutionary. But the witnesses still fail the cross-examination.

**14:60–61.** At least according to later rabbinic law, the high priest could not legally force Jesus to convict himself out of his own mouth, but the testimony of other witnesses is so far not working; had the later law been in effect in Jesus' day, the priestly aristocracy might choose not to observe it. The high priest finally asks whether Jesus thinks of himself as a Messiah—hence, to the high priest's mind, as a revolutionary.

"The Blessed One" was a common paraphrase for "God." "Son of God" was an unusual phrase for a high priest to use, but not an impossible one; or Mark may have put the high priest's question in his own words, a common technique in writing at that time. Most likely he had heard that Jesus had adopted the title for himself, possibly in a messianic sense (12:6).

**14:62.** Jesus' statement is a claim to be not only a mortal messiah but the cosmic ruler of Daniel 7:13–14, the embodiment of Israel's call, who would come in glory and reign forever. (The seating may allude to Ps 110:1.)

**14:63.** Tearing clothes was a sign of mourning or repentance, and was required if one heard the sacred name blasphemed. But the high priest must be desperate for a conviction; unless Jesus mentions the sacred Hebrew name of God or summons them to what would be presumed to be idolatry (e.g., by calling himself God, which he does not at this point), he is not technically guilty of blasphemy (certainly not as it came to be defined by second-century rabbinic teaching but also not by the broader popular sense; cf. 2:5–7). A Jewish court would have been more likely to have pronounced him insane; how could this arrested upstart teacher from Galilee think that he would come in the clouds of heaven?

**14:64.** Under Jewish law, the high priest is not permitted to judge the case alone; he has to solicit the council's vote (if later recorded rules were already in effect, this vote would begin with the youngest and conclude with the high priest). Although they cannot have genuinely believed that Jesus has committed blasphemy according to its technical Jewish definition, they have an important reason to deal with him quickly: he poses a clear threat to the temple establishment (11:15–18), and as a messianic claimant he threatens the whole Roman power structure that they, the Jewish aristocracy, represent.

**14:65.** Unlike public flogging, the behavior represented here—spitting on, blindfolding, striking and taunting a prisoner—was, of course, against Jewish law. While they ridicule Jesus as a false prophet, Peter fulfills Jesus' prophecy concerning him (14:66–72); Jesus thus passes an important test for true prophets (Deut 18:22).

## **14:66–72**

### **Peter's Denials**

**14:66–69.** Slaves in aristocratic households exercised more power and status than the average free person. Although the high priest undoubtedly had many servants, the slave girl would have recognized that Peter and the guards (14:54) were not from the high priest's household. As a servant in an aristocratic household near the temple, she had perhaps been at the temple and could have gotten a good look at Jesus' disciples in the temple courts. Peter's withdrawal from the court to the vestibule perhaps anticipates the need to escape.

**14:70.** Galilean accents differed from Judean accents, certainly in Aramaic and presumably (as undoubtedly here) in Greek. The high priest's servants and temple guard would have lived in Jerusalem and regarded themselves as Judeans.

**14:71.** The "curses" Peter utters are not vulgar words; rather, he vows that he does not know the man, invoking curses on himself if he is lying. The temple hierarchy is interested in eliminating the ringleader; unless Peter poses a further threat, his *life* is probably in no danger (although he would be punished for following Jesus onto the high priest's property). But Peter would not know that.

**14:72.** For most people in the ancient Mediterranean, rooster's crowing marked daybreak. Some scholars have suggested that this reference is to an earlier Palestinian rooster crowing between 12:30 and 2:30 a.m.

## **15:1–15**

### **Pilate and the King**

**15:1.** The night trial having been illegal, the officials reconvene somewhere around the first light (about 4:30 a.m.) or dawn (about 5:30 a.m.) to quickly make their conclusion official.

Roman officials like Pilate would meet with clients and members of the public from dawn till about noon, so they must have Jesus ready for Pilate very early. Pilate lived in Caesarea but during the Passover stayed in Herod the Great's old palace in Jerusalem; the Roman governor needed to be in Jerusalem to forestall troubles at Passover.

**15:2–4.** Claiming to be the Jewish king, the Messiah, would lead to a charge of sedition and treason against the emperor. The only offense for which the Jewish leaders could automatically execute any transgressor was profanation of the temple; to them, Jesus' act in the temple had at least approached that, but the leaders know that his claim to messiahship would threaten Pilate more. Pilate had not been particularly cooperative with these leaders in the past, and they need to have a strong case for him now.

**15:5.** Jewish accounts of martyrs testify frequently to Gentile judges' astonishment that the martyrs refuse to cooperate (e.g., 2 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees). Roman law did not, however, interpret silence as an admission of guilt.

**15:6–10.** Releasing a prisoner at the feast is one local custom on which the surviving historical records are silent, but it fits the culture of the time (e.g., a governor in Egypt in A.D. 85 handed someone over to "the multitudes"). Unlike Jesus, Barabbas is a violent revolutionary; but he does not claim to be a king or boast such a large following.

**15:11.** Ancient writers often criticized the fickleness of crowds.

**15:12–15.** A severe flogging normally preceded crucifixion, but it was customarily administered along the way or even after the condemned was fastened to the cross. Crucifixion was the most agonizing form of criminal execution known in antiquity.

When Pilate became governor, he immediately enraged Jerusalem by bringing the imperial standards into the city; more recently, he had built an aqueduct with funds from the temple treasury. His insensitivity had only provoked Jewish hostility, and he had apparently become less eager to clash with the local officials.

### **15:16–20** **Hailing the King**

**15:16.** The Praetorium was Herod the Great's enormous palace, which Roman governors used when they came to Jerusalem.

**15:17.** Purple was always expensive (see Acts 16:14), but more significantly here, purple robes and garlands of leaves marked the Greek vassal princes. The soldiers may have had to improvise from a scarlet Roman cloak.

Many scholars think that the crown of thorns, perhaps from the branches of the thorny acanthus shrub or from the date palm (which would look more like a crown), may have been meant to turn mainly outward rather than painfully inward; thus the crown would have mimicked the wreaths worn by Hellenistic rulers. Because the wreath was twisted, however, some thorns or spikes must have scraped inward, drawing blood from Jesus' scalp. Only the highest king would wear an actual crown instead of a wreath, so they are portraying Jesus as a vassal prince.

**15:18.** The Roman emperor was greeted with "Hail ..." Thus the Roman soldiers mock Jesus ("King of the Jews") here; they would have had little respect for a Jewish king even had they believed Jesus was one.

**15:19–20.** One paid homage to a king (including Caesar) by falling on one's knees.

### **15:21–32** **The Crucified King**

**15:21.** Cyrene was in what is now Libya in North Africa and included a large Jewish community. "Simon" was a typical Jewish name, and devout Jewish pilgrims from throughout the Mediterranean came to Jerusalem during Passover. Roman soldiers could impress anyone into service to carry things for them. Because it is a feast and work is forbidden, Simon is not coming from "the field" (literally) as a worker; perhaps he is late for the festival, only now arriving from Cyrene or from where he is residing temporarily in the countryside.

**15:22.** The site of the crucifixion might have been named "Place of the Skull" because so many deaths occurred there. (The suggestion that the place was shaped like a skull is possible, but the inference that it is thus the purported site of Calvary proposed by Charles Gordon around 1884 is unlikely; the contours of the ground there were created subsequent to the time of Jesus.)

**15:23.** Pious women of Jerusalem normally prepared a solution like this one and offered it to

those being executed to dull their pain (cf. Prov 31:6–7); Jesus chooses to endure the full force of the agony of crucifixion. Myrrh is said to have had narcotic effects.

**15:24.** Roman soldiers customarily divided the executed criminal's apparel.

**15:25.** The third hour began shortly after 8:30 a.m. and ran till shortly after 9:30 a.m. (The exact time of hours would vary according to the time of sunrise from which they were reckoned, hence according to the season of year.)

**15:26.** The charge was often posted above the head of the person being crucified. The claim to be a king would be sufficient to incur Roman wrath; ironically, however, Jesus is called not a royal pretender but "King of the Jews," perhaps reflecting an anti-Jewish sentiment of Pilate or his agents.

**15:27.** The term for "robbers" here (NIV, NASB; cf. "bandits"—NRSV, TEV) is the same one Josephus used for revolutionaries. Thus these two men were probably colleagues of Barabbas and were originally meant to be executed with him that day.

**15:29–32.** Some people observing a crucifixion would normally curse those being crucified, but these people should have been Jesus' allies (15:26). Many ancient writers used irony, and Mark is no exception, reporting unintended truth in the words of Jesus' enemies (v. 31).

### **15:33–41**

#### **The Death of the King**

**15:33.** The "sixth hour" began before noon, the "ninth hour" before 3 p.m. Jesus dies around the time of the evening offering in the temple. Stories were told of catastrophes occurring at the deaths of pious rabbis, especially those whose intercession had been vital to the world; but the biggest point of these signs is that judgment is imminent. Darkness had signified judgment in the past (Ex 10:21–23) and would in the future (Is 13:10; Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:2, 10, 31; 3:15; Amos 5:18; 8:9; Zech 14:6).

**15:34.** Jesus' cry is an Aramaic quotation of Psalm 22:1, which was sometimes recited at this time of day in prayer but receives special significance when Jesus prays it. The first line would evoke this whole psalm of the righteous sufferer—and its hope of divine vindication. (Jesus probably quoted the psalm in Hebrew, as in Matthew; Mark uses the Aramaic form because the saying was transmitted in an Aramaic milieu. "Eli" could be mistaken for "Elijah" much more easily than "Eloi"; cf. 15:35–36.)

**15:35–36.** Members of some circles of Jewish tradition believed that Elijah was sent like an angel to rescue famous teachers, in addition to his role in the time of the end.

**15:37.** Crucifixion generally killed by asphyxiation: one became too weary to keep pulling one's frame up on the crossbeam, the diaphragm was increasingly strained, and eventually one became unable to breathe. But death usually took a few days—much longer than the few hours Jesus suffered.

**15:38.** The holy of holies, which the priest could enter only once a year, was the ultimate symbol of God's dwelling place. God's rending the veil meant that he was now available apart from the temple system and that the old temple order stood judged and abolished.

**15:39.** A non-Jew might use a phrase like "son of God" with reference to a pious philosopher or, more commonly, a hero whose father was a deity; but in Mark's Gospel, "Son of God" means much more than that (14:61). Because Romans viewed the reigning emperor as a son of the deified Augustus, the centurion might be recognizing Jesus not only as "king of the Jews" (15:26) but also as a rival to the emperor. Whatever the specific nuance intended, Mark's irony (cf. 15:29–32) is plain: only a Gentile is impressed by Jesus' death.

**15:40.** The women followers were much less likely to be indicted than male followers, but they were still courageous to show up at the crucifixion. The epithet of James, "the Less" (NASB, KJV), is better translated "the younger" (NIV, TEV, NRSV), as the usage of the word in the ancient papyri indicates.

**15:41.** By the standards of the religiously strict, it would have been scandalous for women (especially married women) to travel with an entourage of male disciples; apart from members of the Hellenized aristocracy, Palestinian Jewish women were expected to limit their public activity, keep their heads covered and fulfill their domestic duties. The idea of women patrons (sponsors) is elsewhere known, though again it is striking that these women traveled with Jesus. In this one verse Mark hints at an aspect of Jesus' ministry that potently challenges the social order, especially if these women "followed" as disciples, which they presumably did (cf. comment on Luke 10:39; common use of "follow" in the Gospels).

### **15:42–47**

## The Burial of the King

**15:42.** The sabbath would begin at sundown, within several hours of Jesus' death. It was not lawful to prepare the body for burial on the sabbath (cf. comment on Mt 27:57–58 for what was permitted).

**15:43.** That the Sanhedrin included pious members like Joseph, and not just the sort who appeared in the trial narrative (as pious as even they may have supposed themselves), fits the known diversity within even the Jewish aristocracy of the period. Because he awaited the future kingdom, Joseph was probably not a Sadducee, unlike many of his colleagues.

**15:44.** Crucifixion often took several days to kill a person unless hurried along (cf. Jn 19:31–32).

**15:45.** That excavated tombs include few crucifixion victims suggests that the bodies were not generally made available for burial—a horror to most Jewish sensitivities. One exception found in a wealthy family tomb suggests that then, as now, those with wealth and social power had extra influence, which they could use for good or ill.

**15:46–47.** Joseph must have bought the linen quickly, just before sundown (about 6 p.m.) when the sabbath began. Linen shrouds were customary for burial; tombs cut from virgin rock were the best. Large disk-shaped stones could be rolled in a groove over the mouth of a tomb, making entry difficult. After a body had been prepared for burial it would be left to decompose for one year; then the eldest son or other closest family member would return, gather the bones for burial in a box and deposit them in a slot on the tomb wall.

## 16:1–8

### The Women at the Tomb

Having predicted the resurrection appearances (14:28), the Gospel of Mark would be complete with or without 16:9–20; Mark does not need to narrate them. Many ancient documents were content simply to predict and foreshadow events certain to come after the narrative itself had closed (e.g., the *Iliad*, perhaps the most popular book in Greek antiquity, foreshadows Achilles' death and Troy's fall without narrating them). Such suspension was a literary and rhetorical technique in this period. Some books (e.g., the Jewish historiographic work known as Pseudo-Philo) and speeches and essays (some of Plutarch's) also end abruptly. Mark may have wished to end just short of the resurrection appearances themselves because his persecuted readers were still sharing in Jesus' cross but needed to be reminded of the foolishness of their present doubts of their ultimate triumph.

**16:1.** Bodies were normally anointed with oil (then rinsed with water) before burial, but because Jesus had died on Friday just before the sabbath began (at sundown, around 6 p.m.), this anointing had been postponed. Men were allowed to dress only men for burial, but women could dress men or women. Spices may not have been used for everyone but were often used for the bodies of special persons (e.g., Herod). They reduced the immediate stench of rapid decomposition in the hot Mediterranean days. After one day and two nights, the women could expect that the body would already stink. But Jerusalem is over two thousand feet above sea level and is cool enough in April that in a sealed tomb the body would have still been approachable.

**16:2.** The time is around 5:30 a.m.; it was customary to arise at dawn. At least some merchants are already selling wares, because the women buy spices (16:1) before coming to the tomb.

**16:3–4.** The disk-shaped stone rolled in a groove across the entrance to a tomb, and several strong men would be needed to roll it back. Tombs were normally opened only for the secondary burial of bones a year later and for subsequently deceased family members to be buried there.

**16:5.** In Jewish literature, angels are normally garbed in white. These women need not have automatically assumed that this figure is an angel; the priests in the temple and some others also wore white.

**16:6–8.** Throughout Mark, people spread news that they were supposed to keep quiet; here, when commanded finally to spread the word, people keep quiet. If the original Gospel of Mark ends here, as is likely, it ends as suddenly as it began, and its final note is one of irony. Many other ancient works (including many treatises and dramas) also had sudden endings.

## 16:9–20

### The Commission (An Appendix)

The manuscript tradition and style suggest that these verses were probably an early addition to the Gospel of Mark, although a few scholars (such as William Farmer) have argued the case that they are Markan. In any case, most of the content of these verses is found elsewhere in the Gospels.

**16:9–11.** The witness of a woman was considered unreliable, as both Josephus and the rabbis attest. Given this view and the fact that Judaism was not expecting an individual resurrection of the Messiah, it is not surprising that the disciples do not believe Mary Magdalene.

**16:12–14.** According to Jewish tradition, supernatural beings like angels and Elijah were capable of disguising themselves in different forms. The resurrected Jesus apparently shares this trait, which helps convince some male disciples.

**16:15–18.** Among the signs of the messianic era, Isaiah predicted that the sick would be healed and that mute tongues would speak (Is 35:5–6), and that God's people would be witnesses for him (Is 43:10). The powers here attributed to believers are the sort that characterize many of the Old Testament prophets (cf. this theme in Acts).

**16:19–20.** Both Jewish and Greek readers could relate to the idea of an ascension of a great hero to heaven (like Heracles or, in postbiblical Jewish tradition, Moses), but for Jesus to sit at God's right hand goes beyond this idea—it means that Jesus reigns as God's agent (Ps 110:1).