

Thoughts on Mark

2010 March 6th for April 9th

Not much is known about the author of Mark, but it is supposed to be a retelling of the recollections of Peter near or soon after the end of his life. Inasmuch as the burning of Rome was in the same decade and was falsely blamed on the Christians leading to severe persecutions, another purpose of the book could have been to encourage the Christians in the face of persecution and martyrdom.

Mark is the briefest of the tellings of the good news, that is, the shortest Gospel. As such it will have a point of view with a particular focus. We will attempt to discover that focus.

Mark 1:1 - 20

2010 March 15th for April 12th

The first half chapter of Mark contains, in very brief near-outline form, the same information as the first several chapters of Matthew.

Isaiah said:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” --
“a voice of one calling in the desert,,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

This referred to John who preached and baptized in the desert. In his preaching he told of one who was to come who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and “the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.”

Jesus came out from Nazareth and was baptized by John. When he came out of the Jordan river a dove descended on him from heaven and a voice from heaven saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

From there he went to the desert and was tempted by Satan for forty days, surrounded by wild animals and attended by angels.

Then John was put in prison and Jesus went to Galilee proclaiming,

“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he found Simon and Andrew working as fishermen. Jesus called them to be his disciples saying, “Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”

They left their business and followed him immediately,

Similarly he called James and John who left their family business, their father Zebedee, and his hired men behind in his boat.

Mark 1:21 - 45

2010 March 16th for April 13th

With his first followers, Jesus went to Capernaum where he taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Right there in church a man with an evil spirit started yelling at him, calling him the “Holy One of God” and asking what he wanted. Jesus silenced and threw out this evil spirit.

The people were stunned at this new teaching. The teacher actually had authority too!

From the synagogue they went to Simon’s house where his mother in law was sick. Jesus healed her and she waited on them. People brought demon possessed friends and relatives that evening. He cast out the demons but wouldn’t let them speak because they knew who he was. He had learned from the synagogue experience.

At night Jesus went off to pray by himself and no one could find him. When Simon and the others found him they told him that everyone was looking for him.

“Jesus replied, ‘Let us go somewhere else -- to the nearby villages -- so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.’”

Throughout Galilee, Jesus preached and drove out people’s demons.

A man with leprosy came and begged to be healed. Jesus healed him and told him to go do the Jewish purification ritual without telling anyone what had happened. The man went off and talked up his healing everywhere. “As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.”

Mark 2

2010 March 17th for April 14th

Jesus was preaching in a house in Capernaum and there were so many people that there was no room. Some men brought a paralytic friend of theirs to be healed and couldn’t get close so they dug a hole in the roof and lowered him down in front of Jesus. Jesus forgave the man’s sins.

This caused a stir among the religious in the crowd. Only God could forgive sins. Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked whether it was easier to forgive a man’s sins or to heal his paralysis. He then healed the man’s paralysis and told him to get up and walk home, which he did, to everyone’s amazement.

Jesus went out by the lake and everyone followed him. He called Levi the tax collector as a disciple, then they went to dine at Levi’s house with “tax collectors and sinners.” When the

Pharisees asked about this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

Jesus and his disciples did not seem to be fasting as was the normal custom for pious Jews. John’s disciples fasted, however, and so did the Pharisees, and they asked about this. Jesus said that the friends of the groom didn’t fast during the wedding. There would be time enough for fasting later after he was gone.

He also discussed the new religion he was establishing. You don’t put new wine in old wineskins (new religion in the old customs and ways of thought), he said, because the old skins will be overwhelmed and both will be ruined.

As they passed through a grain field on the Sabbath, some of the disciples were eating heads of grain. The religious establishment challenged this too. In reply Jesus gave several examples from the scriptures where people had violated the Sabbath in the interest of higher causes then pointed out that the Sabbath had been made for man’s benefit. Man was not created just to be an observer of an arbitrary rule; the rule had been established to help man.

Mark 3

2010 March 18th for April 15th

A man with a shriveled hand was in the synagogue one Sabbath. Jesus made a very public demonstration. He had the man stand up and asked, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath; to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” No one answered. He healed the man.

“Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”

Jesus withdrew into the hills with his disciples, but large crowds followed. He healed many, continuing to command the evil spirits not to tell who he was.

On the mountainside, Jesus called out twelve to be apostles and sent them out to preach and with authority to drive out demons. The apostles were: Simon (Peter), James and John (sons of Zebedee, nicknamed “Sons of Thunder”), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (son of Alphaeus), Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot.

Jesus and his disciples were in a house and it was so crowded that they were not able to eat. His family said he was out of his mind and came to get him. The religious establishment called him Beezebub (lord of the flies, also an alias for Satan). Jesus asked how Satan could drive out Satan saying, “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.” Also he said, “In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man.” Jesus concluded, “I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.”

Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him. Someone inside told him they were there, but he would not go out.

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” To those in the circle with him he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.”

This was a radical redefinition of family, and “in group.”

Mark 4

2010 March 20th for April 16th

Jesus was teaching by the lake and had so many followers that he pushed out in a boat. He taught them using the parable of the farmer. The salutation, the first word, has to be just because he is standing in a boat trying to address a large crowd. It seems to me like it would have been followed by a pause for the crowd to quieten down.

“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”

When they were alone, the disciples asked him about all the parables. His reply was:

“The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,

‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’”

The quote is from Isaiah. We have struggled with this concept before. “Insideness” and “outsideness” seem to be features of the culture in which Jesus lived.

Jesus then explained the parable to them. The seed was the Word of God and in various places where it is sown it takes root in different ways. Some are rewarded with a good crop, with others it was misplaced in some way or another.

Jesus had another parable:

“Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.

“Consider carefully what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you -- and even more. Whoever has will be given more, whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”

We have struggled with this before too, but we have not observed that it does not match reality.

He then told a parable of seeds planted, growing, and being harvested and a parable after that about a mustard seed.

“What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”

He told many more parables that are not recorded here but only explained what any of them meant to the disciples in private. It is these private revelations that we have in today's Bible.

One evening they started to cross the lake in a boat but in the middle of the night a furious storm came up while Jesus was sleeping in the back. In fear, the disciples awakened him and he shouted something like “Shut Up!” to the storm, which obeyed him and ended.

The disciples “were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’”

Mark 5

2010 March 22nd for April 19th

After crossing the lake, Jesus and the disciples were in the region of the Gerasenes (Gentiles). There was a man there who was inhabited by many demons. The demon(s), speaking through the man, came begging:

“What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!”

Jesus had been commanding the demons to come out. When Jesus asked their name it was “Legion” because there were so many of them.

After negotiations, Jesus allowed the demons to go into a herd of pigs nearby. The pigs, two thousand of them, then charged down the bank into the water and drowned. This caused a stir in the whole area. Moreover, the formerly possessed man was sitting there in his right mind. He wanted to follow Jesus but Jesus sent him back to his family, telling him to spread the news in the ten nearby cities.

Note that among the Jews Jesus tells those he heals not to say anything. Here he instructs the man to go preach to the Gentiles.

Note also that everything Jesus commands doesn't happen immediately. He had to work at this one.

As requested, Jesus then left the area.

Back on the Jewish side of the lake, Jesus was once again surrounded by a large crowd. A leader from the local synagogue, Jairus, had a daughter who was sick enough to die. He asked Jesus to come with him. While they were on the way a woman in the crowd who had suffered for many years touched Jesus' cloak in order to be healed. Jesus knew that something had happened and inquired in the close pressed crowd who had done this. The woman confessed and Jesus told her that her faith had made her well. Meanwhile, Jairus' daughter did die and his servants came to say, "don't bother."

But, Jesus, taking only Peter, James, and John with him, went on up to Jairus' house where the funeral had already started. He went to the girl privately and raised her back to life, saying that she was only asleep. He told everyone not to say anything about this and also to give the girl something to eat.

Mark 6:1 - 29

2010 March 23rd for April 20th

Jesus went to his home town and, as usual, when he taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath, people were amazed. Here, however, they were amazed that this man, the son of Joseph the carpenter, was the great teacher. Wasn't this Mary's son, brother of James, Joseph, Judas, Simon, and several sisters who were present?

To their offense, Jesus said, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." Because of this he could only miraculously heal a few people there.

Going around and teaching in various villages, one day Jesus called in the twelve and sent them on a mission trip in pairs. He told them to travel light, wearing sandals but having no extra clothes or money. He told them to stay in people's houses and return their acceptance with blessings and their rejection with curses. They were to preach repentance, drive demons out, and anoint sick people with oil.

Herod heard about the expanding ministry of Jesus and his disciples and was afraid that Jesus was the reincarnation of John the Baptist.

How come John the Baptist to be dead? Herod had had him arrested because John kept telling him that it was illegal to have his brother Phillip's wife Herodias as his own wife. While John was in prison there was a big birthday party one night. Herodias' daughter entertained and was

so pleasing to Herod that he promised her anything up to half the kingdom. The daughter didn't know what to do with this, so she asked her mother what to do. Her mother suggested the head of John the Baptist. Though Herod was distressed by this, it was more important for him to save face than for John to have his head, so John was beheaded in prison that night and the head was brought to Herodias' daughter who gave it to Herodias.

John's disciples came and buried the remainder of the body.

Mark 6:30 - 56

2010 March 24th for April 21st

The apostles returned from their missionary training trip and reported what had happened. They were surrounded by such a crowd that they couldn't even eat and Jesus moved his small party to a quieter place. The crowd followed them out to a remote place where they were then stranded at meal time with nothing to eat. In the face of this crowd control problem the disciples were worried.

Jesus told the disciples to feed them. They didn't understand how, claiming that it would take a year's wages to do something like that (even if they could find a place to spend the money). Jesus ordered a survey of the crowd and they found a boy with a few loaves and fishes. Blessing this food, Jesus had the disciples hand it out to the crowd. "They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish."

Right away Jesus sent the disciples out on the boat while he dismissed the crowd again, then went to the hills to pray. In the middle of the night, they were caught in bad weather and Jesus could see them on the lake straining. "About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified."

He told them not to be afraid and got into the boat and the storm ended. This was totally amazing. In fact it says, "They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened."

This is one of those narrative asides that I do not understand. What was to understand about the loaves and fishes that would lead one to assume that Jesus could also control the weather, or walk on water? Does the narrator benefit from 20/20 hindsight? Why does this lack of understanding, this inability to see what is clearly unnatural, count as "hardness of heart"? Is this hardness of heart imposed, or allowed by God as it was in the case of Pharaoh?

When they arrived at the other side of the lake, the crowd was already there and Jesus healed many. Even people who touched his clothing were healed.

Mark 7

2010 March 26th for April 22nd

The Pharisees had many traditions about washing and cleaning, especially around food. These were extensions of the common sense cleanliness laws from Moses. Jesus and his disciples didn't do the traditional stuff, however. The Pharisees asked why they didn't "live according to the tradition of the elders."

Jesus had no use for this attitude.

"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.

"You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

Then Jesus had pointed words for the whole crowd:

"Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'"

The disciples didn't get this, so privately he had hard words for them too:

"Are you so dull? Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body."

Jesus thus "declared all foods clean."

"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"

Jesus then left the area and headed for Tyre trying to keep anyone from knowing where he was going. A woman from Syrian Phoenicia approached him and begged for a demon to be cast out of her daughter. The woman being Gentile, and Jesus trying to just be private for a minute, he told her that he was sent only to the Jews. She countered that even dogs ate scraps under the (Jewish) children's table. (Gentiles were thought of as dogs.) Jesus cast the demon out of the girl at a distance and told the woman that her great faith had brought about what she wanted.

Leaving that area, they were approached by a deaf mute who wanted to be able to speak and hear. Jesus touched his ear canals and tongue and sighed deeply telling it all to open up. At once the man could hear and speak.

Jesus told everyone not to advertise what he was doing, but the more he did this the more the people proclaimed the miracles. Everyone was amazed and thought him excellent.

Mark 8:1 - 21

2010 March 26th for April 23rd

Another large crowd had gathered around Jesus and had been with him for three days and thus had exhausted any food they might have brought with them. Jesus was concerned for them knowing that if he sent them home like this some of them might not make it. He asked the disciples how much food they had. They didn't have much, only seven loaves and a few small fish.

Jesus had the people sit down and he gave thanks for the food they had and started passing it out. After four thousand men plus any family members who may have been with them ate their fill, the disciples picked up seven baskets full of leftovers. Jesus then sent them off and got in the boat to go to Dalmanutha.

This second feeding of thousands of people is probably told in this way to demonstrate that the crowds didn't just have food with them that they were eating making it only appear as if Jesus had produced extra food from nothing.

At Dalmanutha, Pharisees asked for a miraculous sign. Jesus gave them nothing and got back in the boat to go yet another place.

It occurs to me that Jesus' uncontrollable popularity motivated much of his movement and that pretty much the only private time he and the disciples had was in boats on the way between stops. Though this was clearly hard on them and I've heard it preached that all the people telling what Jesus was doing even though he told them not to was sinful and the cause of a lot of unnecessary distress to his ministry, this could also be seen as God's method of getting the message out as far as Jesus could physically go.

Just a thought.

While they were on the lake Jesus told them to be careful about the "yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." They thought he was saying this because they had nearly no food in the boat with them (only one loaf). He explained to them more plainly that he was talking about spiritual matters. How much food had he fed all those people those two times on nearly no supplies? Bread was not something to be worried about!

Mark 8:22 - 38**2010 March 30th for April 26th**

Some people brought a blind man to Jesus to be healed. Jesus spat on his eyes and laid hands on him and asked what he could see. The man could see but not clearly. Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes again and they were made perfect. In this case, Jesus healed iteratively. He sent the man home telling him not to go into the village.

Jesus asked his disciples who the people were saying he was. Some said John the Baptist, others said Elijah or another prophet. Jesus asked who they thought he was. They said, "The Christ."

"Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him."

His private teaching to the disciples then became dark. He told them that he "must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." He was very plain in his description.

Peter took him aside to rebuke him, but Jesus expanded the conversation to all of the disciples, rebuking Peter instead: "Get behind me Satan!" He then brought in the whole crowd and gave them this sobering news:

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Mark 9:1 - 32**2010 March 30th for April 27th**

Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain and was "transfigured" while they watched. His clothes were "dazzling white" and he was talking to Moses and Elijah. Peter interjected that they should build shelters for their distinguished guests, but they were interrupted by a voice from the cloud that said, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

They fell down in terror and when they got up, they found that they were alone with Jesus again.

As they came down from the mountain Jesus told them not to tell anyone about this until after he had risen from the dead. This led to a lengthy discussion among the disciples about what it might mean to "rise from the dead."

They also asked about Elijah. Jesus said, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell

you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.”

We understand that in discussing Elijah, Jesus was referring to John the Baptist, the beheaded.

When they got to the bottom of the mountain, Jesus found the disciples in an argument with some people and asked what it was about. A man had brought his boy to them who was demon possessed and foaming at the mouth and rigid and the disciples could do nothing about it. Jesus, frustrated, had the boy brought, chastising “this unbelieving generation” in the process.

Unusually verbose for Mark, he tells us the exact words Jesus used on this particular case:

“You deaf and mute spirit, I command you to come out of him and never enter him again.”

“The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out.”

(This kind of departure must be for demons like running for a touchdown after the clock has run out.)

“The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, ‘He’s dead.’” Jesus lifted him up, however, and he stood up,

The disciples asked why they were unable to drive this demon out. Jesus only said, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

As they went on their way, Jesus tried to keep his small group away from the crowds so he could teach his disciples about his betrayal. He said, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”

Clear as this sounds to us since we have the hindsight and training to follow it, the disciples on the spot had no idea what he was talking about.

Mark 9:33 - 50

2010 March 30th for April 28th

One day when they were stopping for the night Jesus asked the disciples what they had been discussing on the road that day. They didn’t want to say because they had been discussing which of them was the greatest.

He sat them down for a lesson. “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” He showed them a child and said, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

John told Jesus that they had caught someone driving out demons in Jesus name and stopped him because he wasn't part of their 'in crowd.' Jesus surprised the disciples by reversing this notion saying, "Do not stop him. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward."

Then he taught about how bad it was to cause someone else to sin.

"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where

"their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."

"Everyone will be salted with fire.

"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

The quote about worms and fire is the very last phrase in the book of Isaiah where the prophet is pronouncing judgment on those who have rebelled against God.

The common interpretation of these severe self inflections is that they are not to be taken literally but are to demonstrate just how serious an eternity in hell would be.

There are many interpretations of hell. Some do not believe in it. Do these people take Jesus seriously? Some believe in little else. Have they read the rest of the Bible?

Mark 10:1 - 31

2010 March 31st for April 29th

Jesus and his followers entered Judea where they were outsiders. Still the crowds followed him and the Pharisees tested him. This time they asked if divorce was acceptable. He asked them what the Law said. The Law of Moses said that a man could write a woman a certificate of divorce and send her away. Jesus said that Moses permitted this to accommodate their hard hearts.

“But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

I wonder if they are “two but one” in the same way that God is “three but one.”

He explained further to the disciples in private.

“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”

Logical and egalitarian as this seems to us, it is radical for Jesus to make the husband and wife equal sinners in causing divorce. In his culture the woman was embedded in her husband and it was not possible to sin against her, only against him by violating his property. To Jesus, however, not only was it possible for the man to commit adultery, but it was a sin against the woman (and God).

The disciples rebuked some children who were coming to Jesus, but he intervened and corrected this. “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

As they started on their way again a young man came and asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to follow the commandments: “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.” The young man had done these all his life. Jesus loved him and went further.

“One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

The young man went away sad. He was very rich.

This was puzzling, indeed, amazing to the disciples. Who could inherit eternal life then? Jesus said it was very difficult, especially for the rich. This was even more amazing. Who could be saved then?

“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

Peter pointed out that the disciples had left everything behind to follow Jesus. Jesus replied to this:

“I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this

present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields -- and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

With the disciples, I am confused about what this means. Does this mean that the disciples, the meek, inherit the earth? None of them became rich in a conventional sense in this life though they did belong to the new church and received the predicted persecutions.

Mark 10:32 - 52

2010 March 31st for April 30th

James and John asked Jesus to do whatever they asked. Jesus asked what it was they wanted. They wanted the places of highest honor, to sit at his right and his left.

“You don’t know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

They thought they could.

“You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

Of course, the other ten were indignant with James and John about this. The nerve! Jesus instructed on this too, teaching that it was not power and authority that they should expect from positions of closeness to Jesus.

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you, Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Seems like we just had this conversation a few days ago.

As they approached Jericho, they passed a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. When he heard that Jesus was going by he stopped begging and started calling for Jesus’ blessing. Although the crowd tried to shut him up, Jesus had him brought and asked what he wanted. He wanted to be able to see. Jesus said,

“Go, your faith has healed you.”

Bartimaeus could see immediately and he followed Jesus down the road.

Mark 11

2010 April 1st for May 3rd

They approached Jerusalem and Jesus sent two of the disciples ahead to get a donkey for him to ride on. This seeming a little strange, walking into town and bringing back a donkey of unknown origin, they asked him what to do if anyone challenged them. They were instructed to say, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly."

They went, found the donkey as described and when the people standing there asked them what they were doing with that donkey, answered as instructed and were permitted to go, taking the donkey with them.

Jesus rode the donkey colt into town, sitting on their cloaks. People threw palm branches and their own cloaks on the road in front of them and as he passed by, shouted,

"Hosanna!

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!

"Hosanna in the highest!"

They went into the temple area and looked at everything but as it was late, they went on out to Bethany for the night.

The next morning as they were coming back into town Jesus was hungry and saw a fig tree ahead. When they got to it, there were no figs on it because figs were out of season. Jesus cursed the tree saying, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

Things were worse in the Temple where Jesus found lots of buying and selling and money changing going on. He tore into the whole business, disrupting and messing up everything and shouting, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (a quote from Isaiah).

The following day when they passed the fig tree they found it withered to its roots. That was some curse! Jesus used it as an object lesson.

"Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Like other teachings, I have always been puzzled like this. Apparently no one on earth has sufficient faith to throw mountains into the sea or some would have been thrown by now. This is

usually taught allegorically too, as if to say that something you really needed done would be done if you really had enough faith, but that's not exactly what it seems to say and that's not exactly how things seem to work.

Jesus' authority was questioned by the establishment. After all, he had just used it to disrupt their entire temple courts' business model the day before. Before answering about the source of his authority, he asked them about John the Baptist, where was he sent from. The leaders were stuck. If they said "from God," Jesus had them because they had ignored John's teaching. If they said "from men," the crowds would react since John was a big crowd favorite. They answered that they did not know, which was at least partly true.

Jesus then used this as grounds to refuse to answer their question as well.

Mark 12:1 - 27

2010 April 2nd for May 4th

There in the temple, Jesus began teaching in parables. In one parable a man owned a vineyard and rented it out to people to tend it. When he sent his servants to collect his rent, the tenants shamed and killed them. This happened repeatedly until finally the owner sent his son, whom he loved.

The tenants realized that it was the son who had come this time and thought they could gain the vineyard for themselves by killing him, which they did. The owner, enraged, came and threw out all the tenants and killed them.

The religious leaders realized that the parable was about them. They were the tenants and the servants and Jesus were the prophets and the son. The owner was God and the vineyard was the faith. The part of the parable about killing the son looks into the near future, which they contemplated.

The religious leaders tried testing Jesus by asking him an entrapping question of the day: was it legal for them to pay taxes to Caesar or not? It was popular to think that, because they belonged to God that they did not owe taxes to any other earthly authority and, indeed, it was a burden to be required to tithe and also pay taxes to the state. Further, Caesar was considered a God. Worship of Caesar would be blasphemous for an Israelite.

Jesus was irritated with this test and called it what it was. Then he had a coin brought and, upon examining it, ruled that Caesar, whose picture was shown on the coin, should be paid what he was owed and God should be paid what he was owed. The questioners found this amazing. Jesus did not teach overt insurrection.

In another test, some Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection or life after death, posed a legal question. The law required a brother to marry his deceased brother's widow and produce children for him. In their example there were seven brothers, they all married the same woman

in turn and left her a widow in turn. None of them produced children. Whose wife would she be in the resurrection?

Jesus told them that they were “badly mistaken” in their assumption that the dead did not rise and live. He quoted the law, that God was the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Moses right now because those patriarchs were alive right now. This was from the “passage about the burning bush” where God gave his name as “I am.” (Not “I was.”)

As to the question of marriage, there is no marriage for the dead after they rise to heaven.

Mark 12:28 - 44

2010 April 2nd for May 5th

One of the teachers asked Jesus which commandment was the greatest.

“The most important one was this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

The teacher then agreed with him, saying, “Well said, teacher. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Jesus then commended this teacher saying, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

We see from this that Jesus was not in continuous battle with every single religious leader.

After this, people stopped interrogating him so he posed a puzzle to them. “How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

“‘The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’””

The crowd was delighted with this. Jesus then denounced the teachers.

“Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.”

Jesus then took his disciples to the area where offerings were given and they watched several people put in lots of money. A poor widow came and put in the smallest coin possible. Jesus commended this.

“I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty, put in everything -- all she had to live on.”

Mark 13

2010 April 5th for May 6th

This is Mark's version of the famous Matthew 24 prophecies about the end times. The disciples were admiring the magnificence of the temple when Jesus told them that it would all be destroyed, that not one stone would be left on another. When they asked privately when all this would be happen and how they would know it was about to happen, Jesus gave this unusually lengthy and detailed reply.

“Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

“You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

“When you see ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ standing where it does not belong [quoting from Daniel] -- let the reader understand -- then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down or enter the house to take anything out. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that this will not take place in winter, because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now -- and never to be equaled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them. At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect -- if that were possible. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.

“But in those days, following that distress,

“the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ [quoting Isaiah]

“At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

“No one knows about that day and hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back -- whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

When Jesus says “this generation will not pass away” is he referring to the generation to which he is speaking, or to the generation when all these things happen? The former seems the clearer intent, meaning that the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome was the fulfillment. It is more popular in our own day, as in fact it has been throughout the last twenty centuries, to claim the latter, that that the generation clock is ticking right now. Indeed, troubles unequaled since the beginning and never to be equaled again may imply something worse than even the 70 A.D. destruction of Jerusalem, though it might depend on your perspective.

He tells us no one knows when. He tells us the signs to look for. He tells us that we don’t know what will happen when so that we will always be ready.

Mark 14:1 - 26

2010 April 7th for May 7th

The religious leaders were looking for a way to arrest and kill Jesus but they didn’t want it to be during the feast because they were afraid there might be a riot.

Meanwhile, Jesus was in Bethany with his disciples when a woman came and poured very expensive perfume all over him. The disciples were angry at this “waste” of resources, but Jesus

said it was preparation for his burial. This was the last straw for Judas Iscariot who went right out and made a deal with the religious leaders to turn Jesus in.

On the first day of the feast, the disciples asked where they should go prepare the Passover. He told them to go into town and follow a man who was carrying a water jar and when the man entered a home, say to the owner, “The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?”

They did this and the man showed them a “large upper room, furnished and ready.” They prepared the feast there.

While they ate, Jesus said that one of them who was there would betray him. They all, of course, denied that they would. Jesus reaffirmed that he was to be betrayed and added, “The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

Jesus took the bread and said, “Take it; this is my body.”

He took the cup and, offering it to them, said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.

“I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.”

They sang a hymn then went to the Mount of Olives.

Mark 14:27 - 52

2010 April 7th for May 10th

At the Mount of Olives, Jesus predicted that his disciples would desert him, quoting Zechariah,

“I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.”

They all protested that they would not desert, particularly Peter who claimed that he would never leave and would be the last one standing, even if it meant going to death with Jesus. Jesus answered Peter specifically, “I tell you the truth, today -- yes, tonight -- before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.”

They moved on to Gethsemane where Jesus went aside and prayed. The disciples fell asleep waiting. Jesus prayed that God would take away the suffering he was to experience, but submitted in that he said he would do God’s will. whatever it was. While he was praying, he paused and found the disciples sleeping twice and complained to them that they were not sitting up with him. Then, the third time he found them sleeping a crowd was approaching. He was being betrayed, it was time to go.

Judas came up and kissed him, the sign to the crowd indicating which one to arrest. Jesus said,

“Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.”

At that point, everyone deserted, including a possible cameo.

“A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.”

Traditionally, that young man was Mark, the author.

Mark 14:53 - 72

2010 April 7th for May 11th

And so, in the middle of the night, Jesus was put on trial before the religious leaders. They brought in many false witnesses, some testifying that he had said he would tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days. No pair of testimonies agreed, however, so they were getting nowhere. (Two agreeing testimonies were needed for a conviction.)

Then the chief priest, presiding, got up and asked Jesus directly if he was the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus replied:

“I am.” [By replying this way, he was using God’s name, “I am”, itself a “blasphemy.”] “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

The high priest tore his clothes and exclaimed, “Blasphemy.” He asked for the opinion of the judges and they all said, “death!” (The law would require death by stoning. The law would also require a trial during the daytime.)

“Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, ‘Prophecy!’ And the guards took him and beat him.”

Meanwhile, Peter was out in the courtyard and a servant girl was taking a close look at him. She said,

“You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus.”

Notice that this slur was not only classist but racist. As the saying was, “What good can come out of Nazareth?”

Peter denied having known anything about Jesus.

Later the girl repeated the accusation and Peter repeated the denial.

Someone else said, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." (This too was racist, at least "regionalist.")

Peter called down curses on himself and swore, "I don't know this man you're talking about."

At that point, a rooster crowed the second time. Peter remembered Jesus' prediction that Peter would deny him, and "broke down and wept."

Mark 15:1 - 32

2010 April 9th for May 12th

Early in the morning, the religious leaders reached a decision to send Jesus to Pilate for a civil judgment. This is because a death sentence required Pilate's approval.

"Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate.

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

To claim to be a king would be a crime against Rome.

"The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, 'Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.'"

Under Roman law if Jesus did not make a defense, Pilate would be compelled to rule against him.

There was a custom that the governor would release a prisoner each year at the feast. Pilate offered to release Jesus. There was another prisoner, Barabbas, who had committed real crime, an insurrection against Rome, and whose accomplices had committed murder in the process. The religious leaders "stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead."

Pilate, apparently dumbfounded, asked what he should do with Jesus.

"Crucify him!" they shouted.

"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

"But they shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!'"

The situation was getting out of hand.

“Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

“The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.”

Pretty harsh punishment for someone whose crime had neither been established nor even named!

“A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.”

Wine mixed with myrrh would be a drug. It is said that Jesus would not take a drug so that he might have his full faculties for the pronouncements ahead.

Simon was probably a rural Jew in town for the Passover. One wonders if Alexander and Rufus weren't acquaintances of Mark the author....

“It was the third hour [9:00 a.m.] when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!’

“In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.’ Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.”

Some of this abuse arises from a culture of dehumanizing outsiders to which Jesus was himself an outsider.

At noon it became dark everywhere. At 3:00 p.m., Jesus cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Some thought he was calling Elijah and one man offered him some wine vinegar on a sponge on a stick. Then they waited.

“With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

“The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’”

Some of the women were watching from a distance including Mary his mother and Mary Magdalene.

“It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.”

It was bold of Joseph of Arimathea to do all of this.

It was bold of Mark not to omit that Pilate was surprised that Jesus was already dead.

Mark 16

2010 April 9th for May 14th

After the Sabbath, the two Marys were on the way to the tomb early Sunday morning to anoint the body with spices. They were worried about how they would get into the tomb with the large stone there blocking access.

When they arrived, however, the stone had been rolled away and Jesus was gone. A “young man dressed in a white robe” was sitting there. He told them not to worry but that Jesus had risen and was on the way to Galilee and that they should go tell Peter.

“Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

Notice that now that the story is to be proclaimed far and wide, nobody is ready to talk!

In the oldest sources, the gospel ends here. Later, apparently, an addition was made to tie up some matters. In this addition, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene herself. When she went to tell the disciples that Jesus was alive, they didn't believe her.

Jesus appeared to two others walking in the country. They returned to Jerusalem and reported to the disciples.

“Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

“He then said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe. In my name they will drive out demons, they will speak in new tongues, they will pick up snakes with their hands and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.’”

Some Protestant denominations (mostly of charismatic leaning) are based on these various miracles.

“After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.”

None of this extra material disagrees with other Bible accounts. Indeed, it reads like an after-the-fact summary or abstract of them.

Concluding Thoughts on Mark 2010 April 12th for May 17th

Mark reads much like Matthew, but with only about half the number of words. It's like Matthew was paid by the word and Mark couldn't afford parchment. (Just wait for Luke!) The accounts are very similar, however, right down to details of the apocalyptic teaching of Jesus, of Holy Week, and of many of the parables and miracles.

I'm not sure if it was this reading of Mark or from other sources, but I've become aware of something I didn't know before, that Jesus' considered Capernaum his home town (not Nazareth or Bethlehem, the two places mentioned in the Christmas story) and that being from Galilee made him an outsider in Judea, Jerusalem, and with the religious establishment. Well, I knew he was an outsider to the religious establishment. This is one of the reasons I've always worried about being part of the religious establishment myself. But I was unaware of the geographic divisions and biases within Israel during Jesus time.

Not that this should be at all surprising, it's just that I didn't know it before. I remember also being surprised to learn that other religions have denominations inside them just like Protestant Christianity. It's the way people are, and apparently this inside / outside -ness is universal and, in First Century Judea, was socially expected and established in ways that modern Americans find foreign, at least philosophically.

I also picked up on some subtleties in Pilate's predicament. It is common in Protestant pulpits to lambast Pilate for condemning an innocent man, God's Son in particular, but Pilate, like all secular political leaders of all times, was a survival pragmatist. Further, the laws were different. "Innocent until proven guilty" is not a Biblical principle, for example, nor a Roman one. Not that it makes it any better, but Jesus' case was probably not the only miscarriage of justice in that environment. Pilate did no worse than most anyone would, bearing the burdens of command, so to speak. Depending on your theology, one could argue that Pilate was no more "inspirable" than Pharaoh, whose heart God hardened on purpose to make an example of his whole nation.

I am accustomed to Jesus' interactions with the religious leaders being confrontational and vitriolic on both sides, but was interested to see that they were not all that way. One of his last such interactions before he was arrested, with a teacher in the temple, was mutually respectful and approving. Even the rich young ruler had a chance.

And then there was Simon of Cyrene, father of Rufus and Alexander. How would Mark have known this detail if he hadn't known the family? Wouldn't the back story there be fascinating?

Mark is a dense, brief primer on the life and times of Jesus.

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