THE GOSPEL OF MARK

The King in a Hurry

Mark, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King in a Hurry: The Gospel of Mark, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You've probably heard the saying: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." If you read the Matthew book in this series, you've heard it from me already. Sorry. It's still funny, and it's still a little bit true.

Here's the good half of it. You can get things done. You're quick, you notice things adults miss, and you have very little patience for anything that wastes your time. So you might actually like Mark.

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. You can read the whole thing in about an hour and a half. It's also the fastest. Mark skips the birth stories, skips most of the long sermons, and jumps straight into the action. One of his favorite words is "immediately." Jesus is always on the move: healing, teaching, crossing the lake, confronting demons, heading for Jerusalem.

There's another reason Mark might hit home. Early Christian writers tell us Mark wrote down the eyewitness preaching of Peter, the disciple who always had something to say and was usually the first to say it. Peter was sure he understood Jesus. Peter was sure he would never fail Him. Peter was wrong, more than once, and he let Mark put every embarrassing moment on the record.

And Mark himself? He was probably John Mark, a young man from Jerusalem who started out on a missionary trip with Paul and quit partway through. Paul was so frustrated that he refused to take him on the next trip. Years later, Paul wrote that Mark was "helpful" to him. Mark failed, and he was restored. So did Peter. Mark's Gospel

is the story of Jesus told by people who knew what it was like to get it wrong.

That's the challenge of this book. In Mark, the people who were sure they had Jesus figured out kept missing Him. Religious experts. His own hometown. Even His closest friends. The ones who saw clearly were often the ones nobody expected: a blind beggar, a foreign mother, a Roman soldier. So bring your brain. Bring your questions. Just keep your eyes open, and don't assume you already know how the story goes.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 16 chapters of Mark, in order, in 20 short chapters. Each one tells what happened, adds background about the world Jesus lived in (Roman rule, Herod's family, Pharisees and Sadducees, Passover, crucifixion), and points out what Mark wants you to notice.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it. Mark is short enough to read in one sitting, so read the real thing. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the first book in this series, on Matthew, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the whole Gospel of Mark, all 16 chapters, in order. I have worked to stay faithful to the text: no invented events, no rewritten dialogue that changes the meaning. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Historical background is included where it helps the story make sense, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

Mark has features that make it especially good for this age group: it's fast, vivid, and brutally honest about the disciples' failures. It also shows the emotions of Jesus more than any other Gospel: His compassion, His anger at hard hearts, His sighs, His distress in Gethsemane. I've leaned into those things. The hard parts are here too, including John the Baptist's execution and the crucifixion, told truthfully but without graphic excess.

The book also deals plainly with the ending of Mark. The earliest manuscripts end at 16:8, and most Bibles note that verses 9–20 were

likely added later. I've explained that briefly and respectfully, and covered the longer ending as well, so that students aren't surprised when they see the note in their own Bibles.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will move from knowing about Jesus to following Jesus, the King who came not to be served, but to serve.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

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CHAPTER 1

No Time for a Warm-Up

Mark 1:1–13

Matthew opens with a family tree. Luke opens with careful research and a birth story. John opens before the universe existed. Mark opens like someone kicking in a door.

"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God…"

That's it. No manger, no shepherds, no wise men. In the space of one sentence, Mark tells you who Jesus is and what his whole book is about. Then he sprints. Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, and it reads like it was written by someone out of breath. One of his favorite words is the Greek euthys, "immediately." He uses it more than forty times (the NIV translates it several ways, including "immediately," "at once," and "without delay"): Jesus does this, and immediately that happens, and immediately something else. If Matthew is a carefully argued case, Mark is a highlight reel.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Was Mark?**
>
> Early church writers say this Gospel was written by John Mark, a young man from Jerusalem whose mother's house was a meeting place for the first Christians (Acts 12). They also say Mark wrote down the preaching of the apostle Peter. That would explain a lot: the vivid details, the little eyewitness touches, and how honestly the book shows Peter's mistakes. Many scholars

> think Mark was the first Gospel written, probably for Christians in Rome who were facing persecution.

Mark starts with a prophecy, quoting Isaiah and Malachi: God would send a messenger ahead to prepare the way for the Lord. Then that messenger shows up. John the Baptist is out in the wilderness, dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey, and calling people to be baptized as a sign that they were turning from their sins to receive God's forgiveness. People from all over Judea and Jerusalem come out to confess their sins and be baptized in the Jordan River.

John is popular, and he could have made it about himself. Instead, his whole message points away from himself. "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." Untying sandals was a job for the lowest servant in the house. John says he isn't even qualified for that. The most famous preacher in the country thought of himself as unworthy to do Jesus' least pleasant chore.

Then Jesus arrives, from Nazareth, a nowhere village in Galilee, and is baptized by John. Mark says that as Jesus came up out of the water, He saw heaven "being torn open." It's a violent word, and Mark uses it only one other time, at the very end of the book, when the temple curtain is torn in two at the moment Jesus dies. Keep that in mind. The whole story happens between those two tearings.

The Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove, and a voice comes from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Notice the wording. In Mark, the Father speaks directly to Jesus. Before Jesus has preached a sermon or healed anyone, the Father announces where He stands with Him.

And then, “at once,” the Spirit “sent him out into the wilderness.” The Greek verb is even stronger than that: it’s the same word Mark uses for Jesus driving out demons. Not a gentle nudge. Mark’s language is always in motion. Jesus spends forty days there, tempted by Satan. Mark doesn’t give us the details of the temptations like Matthew does. Instead he adds a detail no other Gospel mentions: “He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.”

That’s Mark in a nutshell: short, sharp, a little unsettling, and loaded with meaning if you slow down long enough to notice. The wilderness was dangerous. The animals were real. Jesus was not on a spiritual retreat. He was facing the enemy head-on, alone, and God’s angels were caring for Him through it.

Here’s something worth noticing at the start. Mark tells his readers in verse 1 exactly who Jesus is: the Christ, the Son of God. The people inside the story will spend most of the book confused about that. Demons will know it. Religious experts will deny it. The disciples will half-get it and then lose it again. You, the reader, have the answer from page one. The question Mark keeps pressing is whether you’ll actually believe it.

KEY VERSE

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,
the Son of God,

Mark 1:1 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Mark skips the Christmas story and starts with Jesus as an adult. Why do you think he jumped straight to the action?
2. John the Baptist was famous but kept pointing away from himself. Why is that so rare, and so hard?
3. Mark tells you who Jesus is in the first verse. If you already "know the answer," what keeps people from actually believing it?

TRY THIS *Read the whole Gospel of Mark in one sitting this week. It takes about ninety minutes. That's shorter than most movies.*

CHAPTER 2

Immediately

Mark 1:14–45

After John is arrested, Jesus comes into Galilee preaching a message Mark sums up in one sentence: “The time has come,” He says. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” The wait is over. God’s rule is breaking in. Turn around and trust it.

Then the action starts, and it doesn’t stop. Walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees two fishermen, Simon and Andrew, throwing their net. “Come, follow me,” Jesus says, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” “At once they left their nets.” A little farther on, He sees James and John mending nets in their father’s boat. He calls them, and they leave their father, Zebedee, “in the boat with the hired men.” That last detail sounds like an eyewitness remembering exactly how it looked. It also tells us the family business had employees. These weren’t drifters with nothing to lose.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Capernaum**
>
> Jesus made the lakeside town of Capernaum His base in Galilee. It was a fishing village of maybe a thousand to fifteen hundred people. Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of a later synagogue there, built on what appear to be the foundations of an earlier one, and a house nearby that early Christians seem to have honored as Peter’s home. When Mark talks about Simon and Andrew’s home, he may be describing a place you can still visit.

On the Sabbath, Jesus teaches in the synagogue in Capernaum, and people are stunned. “he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.” The teachers of the law (often called scribes) were the Bible experts. They taught by quoting other experts. Jesus just spoke, and people could tell the difference.

Then, in the middle of the service, a man with an impure spirit starts shouting at Jesus, asking if He has come to destroy them: “I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” Notice the irony. The religious experts in the room didn’t know who Jesus was. The demon did. Jesus doesn’t accept the endorsement. “Be quiet!” He says sternly. “Come out of him!” And it does.

That’s the first example of something Mark keeps showing: Jesus repeatedly tells people, and demons, not to spread the word about who He is. Scholars call it the “Messianic secret.” Why would Jesus do that? One reason is that people had the wrong idea of what the Messiah would be. Many expected a political warrior who would overthrow Rome. If word spread that the Messiah had arrived, crowds might try to make Him that kind of king. Jesus would reveal who He was on His terms, and the full picture wouldn’t make sense until the cross.

That evening the whole town crowds around the door of Simon’s house. Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law, then many others who are sick or troubled by demons. It’s a huge success. By any normal measure, it’s the start of a movement.

And then Mark gives us a quiet sentence that is easy to miss. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark,” Jesus slips out of the house to a solitary place to pray.

Simon and the others hunt Him down and tell Him everyone is looking for Him. Translation: You're trending. Get back out there. Jesus says, let's go to the next towns, so I can preach there also. That's what He came to do. He doesn't let the crowd set His agenda. He gets His direction from time alone with the Father.

Then a man with leprosy kneels in front of Him: "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Then comes a surprise. The NIV says, "Jesus was indignant." (Some ancient manuscripts say He was filled with compassion instead; either way, Jesus is not neutral about this man's suffering.) He reaches out and touches the man, which no one did to lepers, and says, "I am willing… Be clean!" The leprosy leaves immediately.

Jesus strictly warns him to tell no one and to go show himself to the priest as the law required. Instead, the man tells everyone. The result? Jesus can't openly enter a town anymore; He has to stay out in deserted places. The healed man traded places with Jesus. He was the outsider who couldn't go into town. Now Jesus is.

Mark is already giving you a picture of how salvation works.

KEY VERSE

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Mark 1:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The religious experts didn't recognize Jesus, but the demon did. Is knowing who Jesus is the same as following Him? Why not?
2. After a huge night of success, Jesus went off alone to pray and then left town. What does that say about how He handled popularity?
3. Jesus touched the leper before healing him. Why do you think the touch mattered?

TRY THIS *Set your alarm fifteen minutes early one morning this week. Spend that time alone with God before your phone gets a chance to set your agenda.*

CHAPTER 3

Through the Roof

Mark 2:1–3:6

Word gets out that Jesus is back home in Capernaum, and the house is so packed that nobody else can even get near the door. Then four men show up carrying a paralyzed friend on a mat.

They can't get in. So they climb onto the roof, dig through it, and lower their friend down right in front of Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ancient Roofs**
>
> Most houses in Galilee had flat roofs, reached by an outside staircase. The roof was typically made of wooden beams covered with branches and packed mud or clay. You could dig through it, though the homeowner probably wasn't thrilled. Mark says they dug through the roof right above Jesus and made an opening. Picture dust and dirt raining down on the crowd in the middle of Jesus' teaching.

Mark says Jesus saw "their faith." Not just the paralyzed man's, but the faith of the friends who wouldn't let a crowd stop them. Then Jesus says something nobody expected: "Son, your sins are forgiven."

The teachers of the law sitting there are thinking that this is blasphemy, because only God can forgive sins. They're right about the theology. Only God can forgive sins. That's exactly the point. Jesus knows what they're thinking and asks which is easier: to tell

the man his sins are forgiven, or to tell him to get up and walk? Anyone can claim the first; nobody can check it. So to prove He has authority to forgive sins, He tells the man to get up, take his mat, and go home. And the man does, in front of everybody. The crowd says they have never seen anything like it.

Next Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, to follow Him. (Levi is the same man Matthew's Gospel calls Matthew.) Then Jesus goes to a dinner at Levi's house packed with tax collectors and "sinners." The scribes of the Pharisees are scandalized. Jesus answers, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Then comes a run of conflicts. Why don't Your disciples fast? Jesus says you don't fast at a wedding while the groom is still there. You don't sew new cloth onto an old garment or pour new wine into old, brittle wineskins. What Jesus brings won't fit into the old religious containers.

Why are Your disciples picking grain on the Sabbath? Jesus points out that David once ate the sacred bread when he and his men were hungry. Then He says something that cuts to the heart of the issue: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." God gave the day of rest as a gift. The religious leaders had turned it into a burden.

Then, in a synagogue on the Sabbath, there's a man with a withered hand. Mark says the Pharisees "watched him." They weren't hoping for a miracle. They were hoping to catch Him breaking a rule so they could accuse Him.

Jesus calls the man to stand up in front of everyone and asks the room: is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or evil, to save life or to kill? Silence.

Then Mark gives us one of his most striking details: Jesus "looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts," healed the man anyway. Mark doesn't hide Jesus' emotions. Jesus felt anger. But notice what made Him angry: people who cared more about their rules than about a suffering man. And notice that His anger is mixed with grief.

He tells the man to stretch out his hand, and it's completely restored. The Pharisees' response? They go out and immediately start plotting with the Herodians, supporters of Herod's dynasty and normally their political opposites, about how to destroy Him.

We're only in chapter 3, and they already want Him dead. A man just got his hand back, and their reaction was to plan a murder. Being religious doesn't automatically make you right with God. Sometimes it makes you blind.

KEY VERSE

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

Mark 2:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The four friends tore open a roof to get their friend to Jesus. Who in your life needs that kind of friend? Could you be one?
2. Jesus was angry and grieved at the Pharisees' hard hearts. Is anger ever right? What made Jesus' anger different from most of ours?
3. "The Sabbath was made for man." What are some ways people turn good things God gave into burdens?

CHAPTER 4

Out of His Mind?

Mark 3:7–35

By now, the crowds are enormous. People come not just from Galilee but from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea in the far south, east of the Jordan, and the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. It's so crushing that Jesus has a small boat kept ready so the crowd won't press Him into the lake. Sick people push forward just to touch Him. Unclean spirits fall down before Him shouting, "You are the Son of God!" And again He sternly warns them not to make Him known.

Then Jesus goes up on a mountain and calls the ones He wanted. He appoints twelve. Mark gives their purpose in a simple phrase: "that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach." Before they were sent anywhere, they were simply called to be with Jesus. Doing for Jesus starts with being with Jesus.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sons of Thunder**
>
> Mark is the only Gospel that tells us Jesus gave James and John a nickname: "Boanerges, which means 'sons of thunder.'" We don't know exactly why, but elsewhere in the Gospels these brothers want to call down fire on a village that rejected Jesus (Luke 9) and ask for the top seats in His Kingdom (Mark 10). Apparently they had some temper and some ambition. Jesus called them anyway, and John would later become known for writing about love.

The list of the Twelve ends with a sobering line: Judas Iscariot, the one who would betray Him. Jesus chose him too, knowing.

Then something happens that only Mark records, and it's surprising. Jesus goes home, and the crowd is so big that He and His disciples can't even eat. "When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'" A few verses later, His mother and brothers show up outside.

Let that sink in. The people who knew Jesus best growing up thought He had lost His mind. This was His own family. Later we find out that His brothers didn't believe in Him during His ministry (John 7:5). If you've ever felt misunderstood by the people closest to you because of your faith, Jesus has been there.

Meanwhile, teachers of the law come down from Jerusalem, the headquarters team of experts, with a different explanation: He is possessed by Beelzebul, they say, and He drives out demons by the power of the prince of demons. They can't deny the miracles, so they attack the source.

Jesus answers with simple logic. How can Satan drive out Satan? A kingdom divided against itself can't stand. A house divided against itself can't stand. Then He gives a picture: nobody can break into a strong man's house and carry off his stuff unless he first ties up the strong man. Jesus is saying He is the stronger one, and He is in the process of tying up Satan and taking back what Satan stole.

Then comes a serious warning. Every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness. Mark explains why Jesus said it: they were claiming that His power came from an impure spirit. In context, this is the sin of looking straight at the work of God's Spirit and deliberately calling it evil, a heart so hardened it rejects the only source of forgiveness. If you're worried you've done it, that worry itself is

evidence you haven't. People who have truly hardened themselves don't lose sleep over it.

Then His mother and brothers arrive and send someone in to call Him. The crowd tells Him His mother and brothers are outside looking for Him. He asks who His mother and brothers really are. Then He looks at the people seated in a circle around Him and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

This isn't Jesus disrespecting His family. Elsewhere He clearly honors His mother, even providing for her while He's dying on the cross (John 19). He's saying that following God creates a new family, one that is just as real as blood. Anyone can belong. And here's the hopeful part: by the book of Acts, Jesus' mother and brothers are among the believers, praying with the disciples (Acts 1:14). The family that once thought He was crazy came to worship Him.

KEY VERSE

Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.

Mark 3:35 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus' own family thought He was out of His mind. Why do you think the people closest to Jesus had such a hard time seeing who He was?
2. The Twelve were called first "that they might be with him." Why does being with Jesus have to come before doing things for Him?
3. Jesus said anyone who does God's will is His family. What would it look like for your church or youth group to actually act like family?

CHAPTER 5

A Pillow in the Storm

Mark 4

Jesus teaches by the lake again, and the crowd is so big He gets into a boat and teaches from the water while everyone sits on the shore. This time He teaches in parables.

The first is the parable of the sower. A farmer scatters seed. Some falls on the path, and birds eat it. Some falls on rocky ground and springs up fast but withers in the sun. Some falls among thorns and gets choked. Some falls on good soil and produces a crop of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times. Then Jesus tells everyone who has ears to hear to listen.

Later, alone with the Twelve and some others, the disciples ask about the parables. Jesus answers with a question: if they don't understand this parable, how will they understand any of them? It's the first of many times in Mark that the disciples just don't get it. Then Jesus explains: the seed is the word. Some people hear it and Satan snatches it away. Some receive it with joy, but have no root, and fall away when trouble comes. Some let worries, the lie that money will satisfy, and the desire for other things choke it out. Some hear it, accept it, and bear fruit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Parables?**

Parables were short stories from everyday life with a hidden punch. Jesus said that for those "outside," everything comes in parables, and He quoted Isaiah about people who see but don't perceive. Parables sorted the audience. People who were curious leaned in and asked questions. People who had already decided against Him walked away with a nice story and nothing else. A parable is a door that only opens if you push on it.

Then come more quick images. Nobody lights a lamp and hides it under a basket. The measure you use will be measured back to you. The Kingdom is like seed a farmer scatters; he sleeps and wakes, and the seed sprouts and grows, even though he has no idea how. The Kingdom is like a mustard seed, tiny when planted, that grows into a plant with branches big enough for birds to nest in. God's work often starts small and grows in ways we can't see or control.

Then, that evening, Jesus tells them to cross to the other side. They set out in the boat, and a huge windstorm hits. The Sea of Galilee sits in a basin about 700 feet below sea level, surrounded by hills, and sudden violent storms are still common there. Waves crash over the boat until it's filling with water. Several of these men were professional fishermen, and they're terrified.

And Jesus? Mark gives a detail only an eyewitness would bother to include: "Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion." Not just asleep. Asleep on a pillow. Fully human, completely exhausted, and completely at peace.

They wake Him up with a question that sounds a lot like an accusation: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

Ever prayed like that? God, don't You care? Mark doesn't edit it out. He lets the disciples' raw fear stand on the page.

Jesus gets up, rebukes the wind, and speaks to the sea: “Quiet! Be still!” The wind dies down, and it is “completely calm.” Then He turns to them: “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

And here’s the twist. Mark says that after the storm stopped, the disciples were even more afraid than before. “They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’”

They had been afraid of the storm. Now they’re afraid of the person in the boat with them. In the Old Testament, only God controls the sea (Psalm 107 describes God stilling a storm for terrified sailors). The disciples are starting to realize that the man asleep on the pillow is far more than a great teacher.

Notice something: Jesus never promised there wouldn’t be a storm. He’s the one who told them to cross the lake. Being in the boat with Jesus doesn’t mean calm water. It means you’re with the One the water obeys.

KEY VERSE

They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this?
Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Mark 4:41 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. In the parable of the sower, what are the "thorns" that most often choke out faith for people your age?
2. The disciples asked, "Don't you care if we drown?" Is it okay to be that honest with God? Why or why not?
3. The disciples were more afraid after the storm than during it. Why would seeing Jesus' power make them afraid?

CHAPTER 6

Three Untouchables

Mark 5

Mark 5 is one long chapter about three people nobody wanted to touch. A man who lived among the dead. A woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. A little girl who had just died. Under the religious rules of the day, contact with any of them would make you ceremonially unclean. Jesus touches all three, and instead of their uncleanness spreading to Him, His life spreads to them.

The boat lands on the east side of the lake, in the region of the Gerasenes. This was mostly Gentile territory. Before Jesus can even get settled, a man comes running out of the tombs to meet Him.

Mark describes him with painful detail. He lived among the graves. People had tried to restrain him with chains, but he ripped them apart. Then comes the saddest line: "Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones." Matthew mentions this story briefly. Mark slows down and makes you look at the man. This isn't a monster. It's a human being in torment, alone, hurting himself, with no one able to help.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why the Pigs?**
>
> Jews didn't raise pigs; under the law of Moses, pigs were unclean animals. A herd of two thousand on this hillside tells you that you're in Gentile country, part of the Decapolis, a region of ten Greek-style cities. The tombs, the impure

> spirits, and the pigs would all have registered with Mark's first readers as about as unclean as a place could get. That's exactly where Jesus chose to go.

The man falls on his knees and shouts, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" Jesus asks, "What is your name?" The answer: "My name is Legion… for we are many." A Roman legion was a unit of several thousand soldiers. Whatever had taken over this man, it was not small.

The demons beg to be sent into a nearby herd of pigs. Jesus permits it, and the whole herd, about two thousand pigs, stampedes down the steep bank into the lake and drowns. Mark is the one who gives us the number. Two thousand pigs is a huge economic loss. Notice what it says about the value Jesus places on one tormented man.

Then comes the most surprising reaction in the story. The townspeople come out and see the man "sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid." They aren't afraid of the man anymore. They're afraid of Jesus. And they beg Jesus to leave. They would rather have their pigs than the Person who could do this.

The healed man begs to come along. Jesus says no, which is unusual. Instead He sends him home to tell his own people how much the Lord has done for him (the Key Verse for this chapter). For once, Jesus doesn't tell someone to keep quiet. In Gentile territory, there was less danger of a political Messiah frenzy, and this man became the first missionary to the Decapolis.

Back across the lake, a synagogue leader named Jairus falls at Jesus' feet. His little daughter is dying. Jesus goes with him, but on the way, the crowd presses in, and a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years slips up behind Him. Mark adds a detail that sounds

like it comes from someone who had dealt with doctors: she had spent everything she had on many doctors, and "instead of getting better she grew worse."

Her condition made her ritually unclean, which meant twelve years of isolation. She touches His cloak, and "immediately her bleeding stopped." Jesus stops and asks who touched His clothes. The disciples think it's a ridiculous question in a crowd like this. But Jesus keeps looking until she comes forward, shaking with fear, and tells Him everything. He doesn't scold her. He calls her "Daughter," the only time in the Gospels Jesus calls anyone that. "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." He didn't just want her body healed. He wanted her restored in public, so everyone would know she was clean.

Meanwhile, the worst news arrives. The girl has died. Why bother the teacher anymore? Jesus turns to Jairus: "Don't be afraid; just believe." At the house, the mourners laugh at Him when He says the child is asleep. He puts them out, takes her hand, and says in Aramaic, "Talitha koum!" Mark preserves the exact words, then translates: "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" She gets up and walks around. Then Jesus tells them to give her something to eat. The Lord of life, thinking about a hungry twelve-year-old.

KEY VERSE

Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.

Mark 5:19 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The townspeople were more upset about the pigs than glad about the man. What are some "pigs" people value more than other people today?
2. Jesus could have let the woman slip away healed. Why do you think He insisted on talking to her face to face?
3. Jesus told the healed man to start with his own people. Who are "your own people," and what would it look like to tell them what God has done for you?

TRY THIS *Look up the two Aramaic phrases Mark preserves in this book (5:41 and 7:34). Ask yourself why an eyewitness would remember the exact sound of Jesus' voice.*

CHAPTER 7

Hard Hearts

Mark 6

Jesus goes back to His hometown of Nazareth, and it doesn't go well. The people who watched Him grow up hear Him teach in the synagogue and are amazed, but not in a good way. Where did He get all this? "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son…?" And "they took offense at him."

Notice that Mark calls Jesus "the carpenter." Matthew says "the carpenter's son." The word can also mean a builder who worked with wood or stone. Jesus wasn't a celebrity growing up. He was a tradesman with calloused hands, and that was exactly the problem. They thought they knew Him. Familiarity made them blind.

Then Mark writes a sentence that might surprise you: He "could not do any miracles there," except heal a few sick people. "He was amazed at their lack of faith." It's the only time Mark says Jesus was amazed at anything, and what amazed Him was unbelief. Jesus didn't lose His power in Nazareth. But He doesn't force Himself on people who have already decided He's nothing special.

Next Jesus sends out the Twelve, two by two, with authority over impure spirits. The packing list is short: a walking staff and sandals. No bread, no bag, no money. They were to depend on God and on the hospitality of the people they met. And it works. They preach

repentance, drive out demons, anoint the sick with oil, and heal them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Herod Antipas**
>
> The King Herod in this chapter isn't the Herod who tried to kill baby Jesus. That was Herod the Great. This is his son, Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee under Rome. He wasn't technically a king; Rome gave him a lesser title. He had divorced his wife to marry Herodias, who was married to his half-brother. The Jewish historian Josephus also records that Herod Antipas imprisoned and executed John the Baptist, at a fortress east of the Dead Sea.

While the disciples are out, Mark flashes back to tell how John the Baptist died. John had told Herod to his face that it was not lawful for him to marry his brother's wife. Herodias hated him for it. But Herod was strangely drawn to John. Mark says Herod feared John and protected him, because he knew John was "a righteous and holy man." John's preaching left Herod "greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him."

That's a dangerous place to be: interested in the truth, but not willing to obey it. At his birthday banquet, Herod is so pleased with a dance by Herodias' daughter that he makes a reckless public oath to give her anything she asks, up to half his kingdom. On her mother's advice, she asks for John's head on a platter. The king is greatly distressed, but because of his oath and his dinner guests, he won't refuse her. Herod was more afraid of looking weak in front of his guests than of killing an innocent man. Peer pressure is not just a teenage problem. It got a prophet killed.

The apostles come back excited, and Jesus invites them to come away with Him to a quiet place and rest. But the crowds run ahead and are waiting when the boat lands. Jesus could have been

annoyed. Instead, “he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

As evening comes, the disciples suggest sending everyone away to buy food. Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” They do the math: that would cost more than half a year’s wages. Jesus tells them to go and see how many loaves they have. Five loaves and two fish. He has the people sit “in groups on the green grass” (another eyewitness touch: it must have been spring), gives thanks, breaks the bread, and keeps handing it to the disciples. Five thousand men eat, and there are twelve basketfuls of leftovers.

That night the disciples are rowing against the wind, and Jesus comes to them walking on the lake. Mark adds a strange detail: “He was about to pass by them.” In the Old Testament, God “passing by” is how He revealed His glory to Moses and Elijah. They think He’s a ghost and scream. “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” He climbs in, and the wind dies down.

Then Mark ends with one of the most honest lines in the book: “They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.” Not the Pharisees’ hearts. The disciples’. They had just handed out bread to five thousand people with their own hands, and they still didn’t get who Jesus was. Seeing a miracle doesn’t automatically change a heart.

KEY VERSE

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

Mark 6:34 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The people of Nazareth thought they already knew Jesus. How can growing up around church make it harder to really see Him?
2. Herod liked listening to John but wouldn't change. What's the difference between being interested in Jesus and following Him?
3. The disciples saw the loaves multiply and still had "hardened" hearts. Why doesn't seeing something amazing automatically produce faith?

CHAPTER 8

Inside Out

Mark 7

Some Pharisees and teachers of the law come all the way from Jerusalem and notice that Jesus' disciples are eating with unwashed hands. Mark stops to explain the custom for his non-Jewish readers: devout Jews wouldn't eat without a "ceremonial washing," following "the tradition of the elders." This wasn't about germs. Nobody knew about germs. It was a ritual of religious purity, added on top of the law of Moses over generations.

They ask Jesus why His disciples don't follow "the tradition of the elders." Jesus answers with Isaiah: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Then He goes straight to the core problem: they have let go of God's commands and are holding on to human traditions.

He gives an example. God's law says to honor your father and mother. But they had invented a loophole called "Corban," a word Mark translates for us: it means devoted to God. If you declared your money Corban, you could claim it was set apart for God, and then you were excused from using it to support your aging parents. Jesus says that by doing this, they cancel out the word of God for the sake of their tradition, and that's just one example among many.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Clean and Unclean**

The law of Moses set apart certain foods and conditions as "unclean." These laws marked Israel as a distinct people and taught that God is holy. Over time, many teachers added layers of rules about washing, dishes, and contact with outsiders. Mark notes that by teaching what He did next, "Jesus declared all foods clean." That mattered enormously to Mark's readers, many of whom were Gentile Christians in Rome wondering whether they had to keep Jewish food laws to follow Jesus.

Then Jesus calls the crowd over and says something that would have sounded radical: "Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."

Even the disciples are confused, and Jesus is blunt about how slow they are. Then He explains. Food goes into your stomach, not your heart. But the heart is where the real trouble starts, and Jesus gives a list (it's the Key Verse below): sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. That list is uncomfortable because it's so ordinary. Envy. Arrogance. Folly. Jesus is saying the problem isn't out there. It's in here.

That's bad news for anyone who thinks being good is about following the right external rules. You can wash your hands perfectly and still have a filthy heart. But it's also honest, and honesty is where healing starts.

Right after teaching that what makes people unclean is the heart, not food or ethnicity, Jesus walks straight into Gentile territory, near Tyre. A Greek woman, born in Syrian Phoenicia, begs Him to drive a demon out of her daughter. Jesus' answer sounds harsh: it

isn't right "to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." The "children" are Israel; His mission was to them first.

She doesn't get offended. She gets clever. "Lord… even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She isn't asking for the whole meal. Just a crumb. And she's sure that even a crumb from Jesus is enough. Jesus loves it. Because of her answer, He tells her, she can go home. The demon has left her daughter. She goes home and finds her daughter lying on the bed, free.

The Pharisees, the experts, rejected Jesus. A Gentile mother with no religious credentials argued her way into a blessing with humble, stubborn faith.

Then, in the Decapolis, people bring Jesus a man who is deaf and can hardly talk. Jesus takes him aside, away from the crowd, and does something very physical. He puts His fingers in the man's ears, spits, and touches his tongue. "He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, 'Ephphatha!' (which means 'Be opened!')." That sigh is another of Mark's windows into the emotions of Jesus. He felt the weight of human brokenness. The man's ears open, his tongue is loosened, and he begins to speak plainly.

Once again Jesus tells them not to tell anyone. Once again, they tell everyone. And the people say, "He has done everything well."

KEY VERSE

For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.

Mark 7:21–23 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What are some modern "traditions" (in church or outside it) that can make people look good on the outside while ignoring the heart?
2. Jesus' list includes "envy" and "arrogance" right next to "murder." Why do you think He put them together?
3. The Syrophoenician woman asked for crumbs. What does her answer teach about humility and faith?

TRY THIS *Read Jesus' list in 7:21–22 slowly. Pick the one that shows up most in your own heart this week, and talk to God honestly about it.*

CHAPTER 9

Do You Still Not Understand?

Mark 8:1–26

Here we go again. A huge crowd, a remote place, nothing to eat. This time about four thousand people have been with Jesus for three days. “I have compassion for these people,” He says. They’ve been with Him three days, and they have nothing left to eat.

You’d think the disciples would remember what happened last time. Instead they ask where anyone could find enough bread out here. It’s almost funny. It’s also completely human. We forget what God has already done the moment a new problem shows up.

Jesus asks how many loaves they have. Seven. He gives thanks, breaks them, and feeds everyone, and they collect seven basketfuls of leftovers. This feeding happens in or near the Decapolis, Gentile territory. The first feeding was mainly for Jewish crowds in Galilee. The second seems to be for Gentiles. Jesus’ table keeps getting bigger.

Then the Pharisees show up and demand a sign from heaven. This is right after He fed thousands with seven loaves. Mark says Jesus “sighed deeply.” Here is more emotion only Mark records. They weren’t asking because they needed evidence. They were asking to test Him. He refuses. No sign will be given to this generation.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Bethsaida**

Bethsaida was a fishing town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. John's Gospel says it was the hometown of Peter, Andrew, and Philip. Jesus had done many miracles there, and in Matthew and Luke He grieves that the town didn't repent. Archaeologists still debate the exact location; several sites near the lake's northern edge have been proposed.

In the boat, the disciples realize they forgot to bring bread. They have exactly one loaf. Jesus warns them to watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod. Yeast is a small thing that spreads through the whole batch of dough. He's talking about the attitude of the Pharisees and Herod: unbelief that refuses to see God even when He's right in front of you.

The disciples think He's upset that they forgot lunch.

What follows is one of the most intense moments of Jesus questioning His own followers. The questions come in rapid fire (they're this chapter's Key Verse): Don't you see? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and ears that don't work? Don't you remember? Then He walks them through the numbers. Five loaves for five thousand: how many baskets left over? Twelve. Seven loaves for four thousand? Seven. "Do you still not understand?"

Mark doesn't record their answer. Maybe there wasn't one. This is a big theme of Mark's Gospel: the people closest to Jesus kept missing it. If you've ever felt slow to understand spiritual things, it's oddly encouraging. Jesus didn't give up on them.

Then, as if to act out what's happening with the disciples, Jesus heals a blind man in Bethsaida in a way He never does anywhere else: in two stages. He leads the man outside the village, spits on his eyes, puts His hands on him, and asks if he can see anything. The man looks up and says, "I see people; they look like trees walking

around." Partial sight. Blurry shapes. So Jesus puts His hands on his eyes again, and "his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly."

Why two stages? Jesus had no trouble healing instantly. Most readers think the healing is a living parable about the disciples. They can see something about Jesus, but it's blurry. In the very next scene, Peter will declare that Jesus is the Messiah: real sight. But then he'll immediately show that he doesn't understand what kind of Messiah Jesus is: still blurry. Full clarity would only come after the cross and resurrection.

That's how it works for a lot of us. We don't always go from blind to seeing in one moment. Sometimes Jesus works in stages, and the important thing is to stay close enough to let Him finish the job.

KEY VERSE

Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?

Mark 8:17–18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciples kept forgetting what Jesus had already done. What has God done in your life, or in the lives of people you know, that's easy to forget when new problems come?
2. The blind man first saw "people... like trees walking around." In what ways might your view of Jesus still be a little blurry?
3. The Pharisees asked for a sign right after a miracle. Is there a kind of asking for evidence that's really a way of avoiding faith?

CHAPTER 10

The Hinge

Mark 8:27–9:1

Every story has a turning point, and this is Mark's. Up to now, the question has been, "Who is this?" From here on, the question will be, "What kind of Messiah is He, and what does it mean to follow Him?" The road turns toward Jerusalem, and toward the cross.

Jesus takes His disciples north to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way He asks them, "Who do people say I am?" They report the rumors: "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." Everybody had an opinion. Nobody had the answer.

Then He makes it personal. "But what about you?... Who do you say I am?" Peter answers in four words: "You are the Messiah."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Caesarea Philippi**
>
> This city sat at the foot of Mount Hermon, about twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee, near one of the main sources of the Jordan River. It was thoroughly pagan. There was a cave and a shrine there for the Greek god Pan, and Herod the Great had built a temple honoring Caesar Augustus nearby. Herod's son Philip renamed the city to honor Caesar and himself. In other words, it was a place surrounded by claims about gods and lords. That's where Jesus asked who He really was.

After eight chapters of people asking, "Who is this?", Peter finally says it out loud. It's a breakthrough. Sight, at last. And Jesus' first response is… to tell them not to tell anyone. "Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him." The Messianic secret again. Why? Because what comes next shows that Peter has the right title but the wrong picture.

He begins to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, be killed, and after three days rise again. Mark adds, "He spoke plainly about this." No parables. No hints. Straight talk.

For a first-century Jew, the words "Messiah" and "killed" didn't belong in the same sentence. The Messiah was supposed to win, not die. So Peter, fresh off the best answer of his life, does something bold. He "took him aside and began to rebuke him." Picture it. The student pulls the teacher aside to correct His theology.

Jesus turns, looks at the rest of the disciples (so they'll all hear it), and rebukes Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!… You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

That's a shocking thing to call your friend. But it's the same temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness: the crown without the cross. Peter meant well. He loved Jesus. But a well-meaning friend can still offer the devil's shortcut. Peter knew the right answer and still got it wrong. If you've ever been confident you understood God's plan better than God did, Peter is your patron saint.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why the Cross Mattered to Mark's Readers**

Many scholars think Mark wrote for Christians in Rome around the time Emperor Nero began persecuting them in the AD 60s. The Roman historian Tacitus describes Christians being crucified and burned. For those readers,

> Jesus' words about taking up a cross were not a metaphor about minor inconveniences. They were the real cost of following Him.

Then Jesus calls the crowd together with His disciples and lays out the terms. Not just for the Twelve. For anyone. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

People today sometimes say "that's my cross to bear" about a sore knee or an annoying sibling. That's not what Jesus meant. In the Roman world, a person carrying a cross was a condemned man walking to his execution. Following Jesus means letting the old self-centered life die and putting Him in charge. It's total.

Then come the paradoxes. Try to save your life, and you'll lose it. Lose it for Jesus and the gospel, and you'll save it. And what good is it to "gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"

Imagine winning everything: money, followers, fame, the perfect life. And losing yourself in the process. Jesus says that's the worst trade in the universe. The life you try to grip tightly slips away. The life you hand over to Him is the one you get to keep.

He also warns that whoever is ashamed of Him "in this adulterous and sinful generation" will find the Son of Man ashamed of them when He comes in glory. Being a quiet, embarrassed follower isn't a neutral option.

KEY VERSE

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Mark 8:34–35 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter had the right answer but the wrong idea about what it meant. Can a person know all the right answers about Jesus and still be wrong about Him?
2. What would "deny themselves and take up their cross" look like for someone your age, in real, everyday terms?
3. Jesus warns against being ashamed of Him. Where are you most tempted to stay quiet about your faith? Why?

CHAPTER 11

Help My Unbelief

Mark 9:2–50

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, and for a moment the curtain is pulled back. “There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.” That last phrase is pure Mark: practical, almost like a laundry comparison. Somebody remembered how white it was.

Elijah and Moses appear and talk with Jesus. Peter, true to form, offers to put up three shelters, one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Then Mark adds a line that feels like Peter himself telling the story with a little embarrassment: “He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.”

A cloud covers them, and a voice says, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” At Jesus’ baptism, the Father spoke to Jesus. Now He speaks to the disciples. And the instruction is simple: listen to Him. Not to Moses and Elijah, as great as they were. To Jesus. Then suddenly they look around, and they see “no longer… anyone with them except Jesus.”

Coming down the mountain, Jesus tells them not to say anything until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. They keep quiet, but they spend the walk arguing about what “rising from the dead”

could possibly mean. Three chapters of predictions, and they still don't get it.

At the bottom of the mountain, chaos. The other disciples have failed to help a boy possessed by a spirit that throws him into convulsions. A crowd has gathered, and the teachers of the law are arguing with the disciples. The boy's father explains that he asked the disciples to drive out the spirit, and they couldn't.

Jesus' frustration is real: "You unbelieving generation… how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." Mark lets us see that Jesus' patience was not effortless. He felt the weight of their unbelief.

Then comes one of the most honest conversations in the Bible. Jesus asks how long this has been going on. Since childhood, the father says. The spirit has often thrown the boy into fire or water, trying to kill him. Then: "But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

Jesus picks up on one word. "'If you can'?… Everything is possible for one who believes."

And the father blurts out a prayer that people have been praying for two thousand years: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith That Doubts**
>
> Notice that Jesus doesn't send the father away for having mixed faith. He heals the boy. Faith in the Bible isn't the absence of every doubt. It's turning toward Jesus with what you have, even if what you have is shaky. The father was honest about both his faith and his doubt, and he brought both to Jesus. That's not failure. That's prayer.

Jesus commands the spirit to leave. The boy convulses and lies still, so still that people think he's dead. But Jesus takes him by the hand

and lifts him to his feet. Later the disciples ask why they couldn't do it. Jesus says this kind comes out only by prayer. Maybe they had started thinking the power was theirs.

On the road again, Jesus predicts His death a second time. Mark says they didn't understand, and they were afraid to ask Him about it. Ever been too embarrassed to ask a question in class because you were supposed to know the answer already? The disciples were. And it kept them stuck.

When they reach Capernaum, Jesus asks what they were arguing about on the road. Silence. On the way, they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. Right after Jesus talked about dying, they were debating rankings.

Jesus sits down, which is what a rabbi did when he was about to teach something important. "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." Then He takes a little child into His arms. In that culture, children had almost no status. Welcoming a child, He says, is welcoming Him, and welcoming Him is welcoming the Father.

John then reports that they stopped a man who was driving out demons in Jesus' name, because he wasn't part of their group. Jesus says, "Do not stop him… for whoever is not against us is for us." Then He uses extreme language to describe how seriously to take sin: if your hand, foot, or eye causes you to stumble, cut it off. It's deliberate exaggeration, but the point is deadly serious. Deal ruthlessly with whatever pulls you away from God.

KEY VERSE

"'If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Mark 9:23–24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The father said, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" Have you ever felt both of those at the same time? What did you do with it?
2. The disciples were afraid to ask Jesus questions. What questions about faith are you afraid to ask, and who could you ask?
3. The disciples argued about who was greatest right after Jesus talked about His death. Where do you see that kind of competition in your friend group, team, or church?

TRY THIS *Pray the father's prayer this week, word for word, about something you're struggling to trust God with.*

CHAPTER 12

The Man Jesus Loved

Mark 10:1–31

Jesus leaves Galilee for the last time and heads south toward Judea. The crowds come again, and the Pharisees come again, this time with a trap: is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? Divorce was a heated debate among rabbis. Some allowed it for almost any reason. Others only for serious offenses. Any answer would make someone angry.

Jesus asks what Moses commanded. They answer that Moses permitted a certificate of divorce. Jesus says Moses wrote that law because their hearts were hard. Then He goes back before Moses, to creation itself: God "made them male and female," and the two become one flesh. "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Jesus raises the standard rather than lowering it. Marriage is not a contract to cancel when it gets inconvenient. It's a union God Himself creates.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Children in the Ancient World**

In the Greco-Roman world, children were often treated as property, not persons. Unwanted infants could be abandoned. A child had no legal rights and no social standing. Jewish culture valued children more highly, but they were still at the bottom of the social ladder. So when Jesus made time for children, it wasn't sentimental. It was radical.

People start bringing little children to Jesus so He can bless them, and the disciples, acting as bouncers, rebuke them. Then Mark records an emotion that only he mentions: "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant." He was angry, not at the children, but at the disciples who thought kids weren't worth His time. "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." He takes them in His arms and blesses them.

Then a man runs up and falls on his knees. Matthew tells us he was young; Luke tells us he was a ruler. Mark tells us he ran. He's eager. He's sincere. "Good teacher… what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus pushes back on the word "good." "Why do you call me good?… No one is good—except God alone." He isn't denying He's good. He's asking the man if he understands what he's saying. Then He lists commandments about how we treat other people: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat, honor your parents.

The man answers confidently that he has kept them all since he was a boy. He probably meant it. By the outward standard, he was a model citizen.

Now comes the detail that only Mark includes, and it changes everything: "Jesus looked at him and loved him."

Hold on to that. What Jesus says next is going to sound hard, but He says it in love. "One thing you lack." Sell everything, give it to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven. "Then come, follow me."

Jesus doesn't ask everyone to sell everything. He asked this man because He could see what was really on the throne of his heart. He had kept all the commandments about loving people, but he had a

god he didn't know he had. Notice the commandment Jesus didn't list: the very first one, about having no other gods. His money was his god.

"At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth."

He walked away from the one Person who loved him enough to tell him the truth. He thought he had it all covered. He was missing the only thing that mattered.

Jesus turns to His disciples and says how hard it is for the rich to enter God's kingdom. Then the famous image: a camel squeezing through the eye of a needle would be easier than a rich person entering God's kingdom. The largest animal in the region and the smallest opening anyone could imagine. It's not just hard. It's impossible.

The disciples are stunned. Then who can be saved? Jesus answers: "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

That's the gospel in one sentence. Nobody earns their way in, rich or poor. Salvation is something only God can do.

Peter points out that they've left everything. Jesus promises that no one who gives up something for Him will lose out. They'll receive "a hundred times as much in this present age… along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life." Notice that Jesus slips in "persecutions." He never sells a fake version of following Him.

KEY VERSE

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Mark 10:21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus loved the man and then told him something hard. How can telling someone a hard truth be an act of love?
2. The rich man didn't realize his money was his god. What are some "gods" people your age might not realize they have?
3. The disciples were trying to keep children away from Jesus. Who are the people today that others assume Jesus wouldn't have time for?

CHAPTER 13

Not to Be Served

Mark 10:32–52

Mark paints a vivid picture: they are on the road up to Jerusalem, Jesus is walking out in front, the disciples are astonished, and the people following are afraid. Jesus is walking out in front, setting the pace, heading straight for the city where He knows He'll be killed. The disciples can sense something is different. They're nervous.

He takes the Twelve aside and predicts His death for the third time. This time it's the most detailed of all. He'll be handed over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law, condemned to death, and handed over to the Gentiles, "who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Predictions, Three Misses**
>
> Mark structures this part of his book like a pattern repeated three times. In chapters 8, 9, and 10, Jesus predicts His death. Each time, the disciples respond badly: Peter rebukes Him (8:32), they argue about who's greatest (9:34), and James and John ask for power (10:37). And each time, Jesus responds by teaching about humility and servanthood. Mark wants us to see how hard it is for the human heart to accept a crucified King.

Right after the most detailed prediction yet, James and John come up to Jesus with a request: "Teacher… we want you to do for us whatever we ask." Never a good way to start a conversation. "What

do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks. They want the top two seats in His glory, one on His right and one on His left.

Jesus says, "You don't know what you are asking." Then He asks if they can drink His cup and be baptized with His baptism. These are images of suffering. "We can," they answer confidently. Jesus says they will drink His cup. (James would become the first of the Twelve to be martyred, in Acts 12.) But the seats are not His to hand out.

The other ten get angry with James and John, probably because they wanted those seats too. So Jesus gathers them all and contrasts two kinds of greatness. The rulers of the Gentiles "lord it over them." Power means being on top and making others serve you. "Not so with you." Among His followers, the one who wants to be great must be the servant, and the one who wants to be first must be the slave of all.

Then Jesus says the sentence that many think is the key to the whole book of Mark, the Key Verse at the end of this chapter: He did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom.

A ransom was a price paid to set someone free: a prisoner of war, a slave, a hostage. Jesus says He came to pay that price with His own life. That's what kind of King He is. Not one who climbs over people to get to the top, but One who goes to the bottom to lift people up.

Then the scene shifts to Jericho, the last stop before Jerusalem. A blind beggar sits by the roadside. Mark gives us his name: "Bartimaeus (which means 'son of Timaeus')." Mark doesn't usually name the people Jesus heals. Maybe Bartimaeus became well known in the early church, and Mark's readers knew him.

When he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing, he starts shouting, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" "Son of David" is a royal,

messianic title. He's the first person in Mark to call Jesus that out loud. The crowd tells him to be quiet. He shouts even louder.

Jesus stops. "Call him." And the people who were shushing him a second ago suddenly say, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you."

Mark adds a detail: "Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus." For a blind beggar, a cloak was probably his most valuable possession. It kept him warm and was where people tossed coins. He leaves it behind without hesitation.

Then Jesus asks him the exact same question He asked James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?" James and John asked for power. Bartimaeus asks for mercy. "Rabbi, I want to see."

"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he can see, and he "followed Jesus along the road." The road to Jerusalem. The road to the cross.

Here's the irony Mark wants us to catch. The disciples have eyes but can't see what kind of King Jesus is. The blind man sees clearly and follows.

KEY VERSE

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.

Mark 10:45 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus asked James and John and Bartimaeus the same question: "What do you want me to do for you?" If Jesus asked you that today, what would you say?
2. Jesus said greatness means serving. Who is someone you know who is "great" in that way?
3. Bartimaeus threw his cloak aside. What might you need to leave behind to follow Jesus more closely?

TRY THIS *Do one thing this week to serve someone who can't pay you back or give you any status for it.*

CHAPTER 14

Leaves and No Fruit

Mark 11

Jesus finally arrives at Jerusalem. As they approach Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, He sends two disciples ahead to a village with oddly specific instructions. They'll find a colt tied up that no one has ever ridden; they should untie it and bring it. If anyone asks, they're to say the Lord needs it and will send it right back. It happens exactly as He said.

For three years, Jesus has told people to keep quiet about who He is. Now He does something that shouts it from the rooftops. Riding into Jerusalem on a colt was a deliberate act. The prophet Zechariah had written that Israel's King would come to Jerusalem humble, riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). Everyone who knew the Scriptures would get the message. The secret is over.

The crowds spread their cloaks and branches on the road and shout, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" They think the Messiah has come to throw out the Romans and bring back David's kingdom. They're half right. He is the King. But He has not come to conquer Rome. He has come to die.

Then Mark records something that only he includes. Jesus goes into the temple courts and "looked around at everything." Then, since

it's late, He goes back out to Bethany with the Twelve. No speech. No miracle. He just looks around. It's like an inspector walking through a building before he writes up his report. Tomorrow He'll act.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mark's Sandwiches**

Mark has a storytelling habit scholars call a "sandwich." He starts one story, interrupts it with another, then finishes the first. Each story helps explain the other. You saw it in Mark 5 (Jairus' daughter, the bleeding woman, Jairus' daughter) and in Mark 3 (Jesus' family, the Beelzebul accusation, Jesus' family). Here it's the fig tree, the temple, and the fig tree again. When you see the pattern, ask: what do these two stories have in common?

The next morning, Jesus is hungry and sees a fig tree in leaf. He goes to it and finds "nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs." Jesus says, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

At first this looks unfair. Why curse a tree for not having fruit out of season? But fig trees in leaf were known to produce small early buds, and a tree full of leaves with nothing on it was a picture of a promise without delivery. And Jesus is not having a bad day. He's acting out a parable. In the Old Testament, prophets sometimes compared Israel to a fig tree. All leaves, no fruit. Looks alive. Isn't.

Then the middle of the sandwich. Jesus enters the temple courts and starts driving out the buyers and sellers, overturning the money changers' tables and the benches of the dove sellers. Mark adds that He wouldn't let anyone carry merchandise through the temple courts. People were using it as a shortcut.

Then He quotes the prophets: God's house was meant to be "a house of prayer for all nations," but they have made it "a den of robbers." Only Mark includes the words "for all nations." The buying and

selling was taking place in the outer court, the Court of the Gentiles, the one space where non-Jews could come to pray. The leaders had turned the place for the nations to meet God into a noisy marketplace. Lots of leaves. No fruit.

The chief priests and teachers of the law respond the way you'd expect. They start looking for a way to kill Him.

The next morning, the disciples pass the fig tree and see that it has withered from the roots. Peter points it out, and Jesus turns it into a lesson about faith: "Have faith in God." Even a mountain could be thrown into the sea if they trusted God without doubting. Then Jesus adds something about prayer that's easy to skip: when you pray, forgive anyone you're holding something against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive you. Powerful faith and an unforgiving heart don't go together.

Back in the temple, the leaders confront Him and demand to know by what authority He is doing these things. Jesus answers with a question: was John's baptism from heaven, or of human origin? They huddle and realize they're stuck either way. So they say, "We don't know." Then Jesus says He won't tell them either. They weren't really looking for an answer. They were looking for a trap. And Jesus doesn't play.

KEY VERSE

Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'

Mark 11:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The fig tree looked healthy but had no fruit. What does a life that looks good on the outside but has no real fruit look like?
2. Jesus was angry that the space meant for the nations to pray had been taken over. Who gets crowded out of church spaces today, and how could that change?
3. Jesus connected prayer with forgiveness. Why do you think holding a grudge would get in the way of praying?

CHAPTER 15

Two Small Coins

Mark 12

The religious leaders have just been embarrassed, and Jesus isn't done. He tells them a parable about a man who plants a vineyard, rents it to farmers, and goes away. At harvest he sends servants to collect his share. The tenants beat one, wound another, kill another. Finally, the owner has "one left to send, a son, whom he loved." Surely they'll respect his son. But the tenants decide to kill the heir and take the inheritance for themselves.

The story is not subtle. Israel was often pictured as God's vineyard. The servants are the prophets. The beloved Son is Jesus. And Mark says the leaders knew the parable was about them.

Then come the trick questions, one after another.

First, the Pharisees and Herodians. Normally these two groups didn't get along. The Pharisees resented Rome; the Herodians supported Herod's family, who ruled with Rome's blessing. But they team up against Jesus. They start with flattery, then spring the trap: is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? If He says yes, the crowds will see Him as a collaborator. If He says no, He's a rebel.

Jesus asks for a denarius. "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they reply. "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." The coin bears Caesar's image,

so give it back to him. But you bear God's image. Give yourself back to Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians**
> The Pharisees were a popular lay movement devoted to strict keeping of the law and the traditions around it. They believed in angels and the resurrection. The Sadducees were mostly wealthy, priestly aristocrats connected to the temple. They accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament as fully authoritative and denied the resurrection. The Herodians were supporters of Herod's dynasty. In this chapter, all three groups take their shot at Jesus. All three miss.

Next come the Sadducees, who deny that there is any resurrection. They make up an extreme scenario: a woman marries seven brothers in a row, each dying childless. At the resurrection, whose wife will she be? It's meant to make the idea of resurrection look ridiculous.

Jesus doesn't flinch. "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?" The resurrection life won't simply be a replay of this one. Then He goes to the part of Scripture they accepted: God told Moses at the burning bush, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Not "I was." Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive to God. "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

Here are the experts again, sure they'd found the flaw in Jesus' thinking, and Jesus tells them they don't know their own Bible.

Then a teacher of the law who has been listening asks a real question, not a trick: which commandment is the most important of all? Jesus answers with the Shema, the prayer devout Jews prayed every day: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." Love God with everything you are: heart, soul, mind, and strength. And

then He adds a second, which you'll find with the first in the Key Verse below.

The man agrees and says that loving God and neighbor matters more than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. Jesus sees that he answered wisely and tells him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." It's one of the only times in Mark that a religious expert gets close. Not far. But not in yet.

Jesus then warns the crowd about the teachers of the law who love flowing robes, respectful greetings, and the best seats, and who swallow up widows' houses while making long prayers for show. Hold that phrase about widows. Mark is about to show us one.

Jesus sits down opposite the temple treasury and watches people put in their offerings. The rich throw in large amounts. Then a poor widow comes and puts in "two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents." Jesus calls His disciples over. "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others." The others gave out of their surplus. She gave "all she had to live on."

Everyone else in this chapter is trying to look impressive. The widow isn't trying to look like anything. Nobody else noticed her. Jesus did. God doesn't measure giving by the amount. He measures it by what it costs and what it reveals about your trust. She gave everything because she trusted God with everything.

KEY VERSE

'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.

Mark 12:30–31 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The coin had Caesar's image. You have God's image. What would it look like this week to "give back... to God what is God's"?
2. Jesus told the teacher of the law he was "not far from the kingdom of God." What's the difference between being close and being in?
3. Nobody noticed the widow, but Jesus did. Who do you tend not to notice? How might Jesus see them differently?

TRY THIS *Give something this week that actually costs you something: time, money, or attention. Don't tell anyone.*

CHAPTER 16

Not One Stone

Mark 13

As Jesus leaves the temple, one of His disciples is gawking like a tourist at the massive stones and magnificent buildings. He had a point. Herod the Great had rebuilt the temple into one of the most impressive structures in the Roman world. Some of its stones were enormous, and the whole complex gleamed with white stone and gold.

Jesus answers, "Do you see all these great buildings?... Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

That would have sounded unthinkable. The temple was the center of Jewish life, the place where God's presence was believed to dwell. But about forty years later, in AD 70, Roman armies under the general Titus destroyed Jerusalem and burned the temple. It has never been rebuilt.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Fall of Jerusalem**
>
> In AD 66, Jewish rebels revolted against Rome. Four years later, after a brutal siege, the Romans broke into Jerusalem. The historian Josephus, who was there, describes famine, fire, and massive loss of life. The temple was destroyed. In Rome, the Arch of Titus still stands, carved with images of soldiers carrying away the temple's golden lampstand. Jesus had predicted it a generation earlier.

Later, sitting on the Mount of Olives, looking across at the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask Him privately when all this will happen, and what the sign will be. Jesus' answer, which fills this chapter, is sometimes called the "Little Apocalypse." It looks ahead to the destruction of the temple and beyond it to His own return at the end of history. The two events overlap in His teaching like two mountain peaks seen from a distance.

You might expect Jesus to start with a timeline. He starts with a warning: "Watch out that no one deceives you." Many will come claiming His name. There will be wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines. But "do not be alarmed… These are the beginning of birth pains." Birth pains are painful, but they're not meaningless. They mean something new is coming.

Then He gets personal. His followers will be handed over to councils, flogged in synagogues, and put on trial before governors and kings. Families will turn against each other. Everyone will hate them because of Him. But "the one who stands firm to the end will be saved." For Mark's first readers in Rome, this wasn't theory. It was happening.

But in the middle of the warning, Jesus gives them two promises. First, "the gospel must first be preached to all nations." The persecution won't stop the message. Second, when they're on trial, they don't need to panic about what to say: "it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit."

He speaks of "the abomination that causes desolation," a phrase from Daniel, and tells those in Judea to flee to the mountains when they see it. Mark inserts a little aside: "let the reader understand." It's like a footnote to his readers: pay attention to this one.

Then Jesus looks past the fall of Jerusalem to the end: the sun darkened, the stars falling, and "people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." He will gather His people "from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens."

And when will it happen? Here is one of the most honest sentences in the Gospels: "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." In His human life, Jesus chose to live within limits. If even He didn't claim to know the date, then anyone who sets a date for the end of the world is claiming more than Jesus did.

So what are we supposed to do? Not calculate. Watch. He tells a short parable about a man who leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, "each with their assigned task." Then He ends the chapter with a single word, aimed at everyone, including you: "What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

Watching isn't staring at the sky. It's living faithfully, doing your assigned task, ready at any moment to see your Master's face.

KEY VERSE

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Mark 13:31 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciple was impressed by the temple's massive stones. What impressive things in our world seem permanent but won't last?
2. Jesus said even He didn't claim to know the day or hour. Why do you think people are still so eager to predict the end?
3. What would it look like for you to "watch" in a normal week: at school, at home, with friends?

CHAPTER 17

A Beautiful Waste

Mark 14:1–31

It's two days before Passover, and the chief priests and teachers of the law are scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill Him. Their only concern is timing: not during the festival, or the people might riot. They're worried about crowd control, not about whether killing Him is right.

Meanwhile, in Bethany, Jesus is eating at the home of a man Mark calls "Simon the Leper." (Presumably a man Jesus had healed; a leper still in quarantine wouldn't be hosting dinner.) A woman comes in with "an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard." She doesn't pour out a few drops. "She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head."

Nard was imported from as far away as India. Some of the people at the table do the math instantly: "Why this waste of perfume?" It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and given to the poor. Mark says they scolded her harshly.

Think about that number. A year's wages, gone in a moment. It would be like someone pouring out a year's paycheck as a gift.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Anointing**
>
> In Israel, kings were anointed with oil when they were crowned. The word "Messiah" literally means "Anointed One." Bodies were also anointed with

> spices and perfume when they were prepared for burial. When this woman anoints Jesus' head, she's honoring Him as King. Jesus says she's also preparing Him for burial. In Mark's story, both are true at once: Jesus is the King who reigns by dying.

Jesus defends her: "Leave her alone… Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me." Then He tells them they will always have the poor with them and can help them any time, "But you will not always have me." He isn't saying the poor don't matter. He's quoting a passage in Deuteronomy that commands generosity to the poor precisely because poverty will always exist. His point is that this moment is unique.

Then He says something stunning. "She did what she could." She had anointed His body ahead of time for burial. And wherever the gospel is preached, her story will be told (that's the Key Verse for this chapter). And here you are, reading about her two thousand years later. Promise kept.

The disciples saw waste. Jesus saw worship. The critics measured her gift in money. Jesus measured it in love.

And right after this scene of extravagant love, Mark tells us that "Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them." The contrast is deliberate. One person gives up a fortune for Jesus. Another gives up Jesus for money.

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, Jesus sends two disciples into the city with another oddly specific instruction: a man carrying a jar of water will meet them, and they should follow him. Carrying water was normally women's work, so a man doing it would stand out. They find a large upstairs room, furnished and ready, and prepare the Passover.

That evening, while they're eating, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me." Sharing a meal was a sign of friendship and trust. Betraying someone you had eaten with was considered a special kind of treachery. One by one, they ask, "Surely you don't mean me?" Nobody points at Judas. Everyone wonders about himself.

Then Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to them: "Take it; this is my body." Then the cup: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

At Passover, Jews remembered how God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, and how the blood of a lamb on their doorposts protected them from judgment. Now Jesus takes that meal and says it's about Him. His body would be broken. His blood would be poured out. The Lamb was sitting at the table.

After singing a hymn (traditionally the Passover meal ended with Psalms 115 to 118), they walk out to the Mount of Olives. Jesus tells them that all of them will fall away. He quotes Zechariah: the shepherd will be struck, and the sheep scattered. But He also promises, "after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Even before they fail, He's already planning the reunion.

Peter can't let that stand. "Even if all fall away, I will not." Jesus gives him a precise prediction: "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." Only Mark mentions the rooster crowing twice. That's the kind of detail you'd remember if it were your own worst night.

Peter insists "emphatically," Mark says: "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." Then comes the line that should

humble every one of us: "And all the others said the same." Every single one of them was sure.

KEY VERSE

Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.

Mark 14:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciples called the woman's gift a "waste." What might Jesus call "beautiful" that other people would call a waste?
2. All twelve said they'd never fall away. Why is overconfidence about our own faithfulness dangerous?
3. Jesus promised to meet them in Galilee before they even failed. What does that tell you about how He sees our failures?

CHAPTER 18

The Garden and the Runaway

Mark 14:32–72

They come to an olive grove called Gethsemane, which means "oil press." Jesus takes Peter, James, and John a little farther, and then Mark shows us something he refuses to soften. Jesus "began to be deeply distressed and troubled." He tells them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death… Stay here and keep watch."

This isn't a calm, detached Jesus floating above the pain. This is a man who knows exactly what is coming, and it is crushing Him.

He falls to the ground and prays, "Abba, Father… everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

"Abba" is the Aramaic word a child used for his father. Mark preserves it, just like he preserved "Talitha koum" and "Ephphatha." It's intimate and trusting. And the "cup" is an Old Testament picture of God's judgment against sin. Jesus is about to drink it on our behalf. He asks if there's any other way. Then He surrenders: not My will, but Yours.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Did Jesus Want to Die?**
>
> Some people imagine Jesus going to the cross easily, almost eagerly, because He knew He'd rise again. Mark won't let us think that. Jesus was fully human.

> He felt dread. He asked His Father to take the cup away. Courage isn't the absence of fear. It's choosing to obey when you're afraid. Jesus didn't go to the cross because it was easy. He went because He loved the Father and He loved us.

He comes back and finds the disciples asleep. "Simon… are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour?" Notice He calls him Simon, his old name, not Peter, "the rock." Then: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Three times He prays. Three times they sleep. Mark adds, "They did not know what to say to him." Peter, the guy who always had something to say, had nothing.

Then: "Enough! The hour has come… Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Judas arrives with a crowd armed with swords and clubs. He had arranged a signal: the one he kisses is the man to arrest. He walks up and says, "Rabbi!" and kisses Him. A sign of respect and friendship, used as a weapon.

Someone draws a sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus asks why they came for Him with weapons as if He were leading a rebellion when He had taught openly in the temple every day. Then Mark writes one of the saddest sentences in the book: "Then everyone deserted him and fled."

Everyone. Including Peter. Including all the ones who said they would die with Him.

Then comes the strangest detail in the whole Gospel, and only Mark includes it. A young man wearing nothing but a linen garment is following Jesus. When they grab him, "he fled naked, leaving his garment behind."

Who was he? Mark doesn't say. Many readers, ancient and modern, have wondered if this is Mark himself, signing his work. Remember, Mark was a young man from Jerusalem, and his family's house was a gathering place for Jesus' followers. Whether or not it was Mark, the picture is unforgettable. Following Jesus in a crisis can cost you more than you're ready to lose, and the young man ran. If it was Mark, he's telling on himself. The same John Mark who would later abandon Paul and Barnabas on a missionary trip, and who would later be restored and called "helpful" by Paul.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Peter's Story**
>
> Early Christian writers said that Mark's Gospel preserves Peter's preaching. If that's true, then this chapter is Peter telling the world about the worst night of his life. He didn't hide it. He put it on record. The rock who cracked became the leader of the early church, not because he never failed, but because Jesus restored him.

Jesus is taken to the high priest. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, looks for testimony to justify a death sentence, but the witnesses contradict each other. Jesus stays silent. Finally the high priest asks Him directly: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

All through Mark, Jesus has kept His identity quiet. Now, standing before the highest authority in Israel, with His life on the line, He breaks the secret wide open. "I am," He says, and then He tells them they will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven. The high priest tears his clothes and calls it blasphemy. They condemn Him and begin to spit at Him, blindfold Him, punch Him, and taunt, "Prophesy!"

The irony: at that very moment, outside, one of His prophecies is coming true.

Peter has followed at a distance, right into the high priest's courtyard, and is warming himself by the fire. A servant girl looks closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus." Peter: "I don't know or understand what you're talking about." She tells the people standing around that he's one of them. He denies it again. Then the bystanders say, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." His accent gave him away. Peter "began to call down curses, and he swore to them, 'I don't know this man you're talking about.'"

"Immediately the rooster crowed the second time." Peter remembers. "And he broke down and wept."

Not a soldier. Not a high priest. A servant girl. Peter promised to die for Jesus and couldn't stand up to a teenager's question by a fire. Know-it-alls, take note. The person who says, "I would never," is often the one who does.

KEY VERSE

"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Mark 14:36 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus was honest with the Father about what He didn't want, and then surrendered. What does that teach about how to pray when you're afraid?
2. Why do you think Mark included the young man who ran away naked? What does that detail say about the cost of following Jesus?
3. Peter folded under pressure from a servant girl. Where do you feel the most pressure to pretend you don't know Jesus?

TRY THIS *Read Mark 14:72 and then John 21:15–19. Notice how Jesus restores Peter three times, one for each denial.*

CHAPTER 19

The Curtain Torn

Mark 15

"Very early in the morning," the Sanhedrin finishes its plans, binds Jesus, and hands Him over to Pilate, the Roman governor. The Jewish council could condemn, but under Roman rule it generally couldn't carry out executions. They needed Rome to do it.

Pilate asks, "Are you the king of the Jews?" To a Roman, that's a political question. A "king" who wasn't approved by Caesar was a rebel. Jesus answers, "You have said so." Then the chief priests pile on accusation after accusation, and Jesus says nothing. "But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed." Isaiah had described the Servant of the Lord as silent before his accusers, like a lamb led to slaughter. Mark lets the silence speak.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Pontius Pilate**
>
> Pilate governed Judea for Rome from about AD 26 to 36. Ancient historians describe him as harsh and willing to use violence against crowds. In 1961, archaeologists at Caesarea Maritima found a stone inscription bearing his name and title. He usually lived on the coast but came to Jerusalem during major festivals like Passover, when the city was packed with pilgrims and the risk of riots was high.

Pilate has a custom of releasing one prisoner at the festival. In custody is a man called Barabbas, locked up with rebels who had committed murder in an uprising. A violent rebel. Pilate offers to

release “the king of the Jews,” because he can see the chief priests have handed Jesus over out of self-interest, which is a polite way of saying jealousy.

But the chief priests stir up the crowd to ask for Barabbas. Pilate asks, “What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” “Crucify him!” “Why? What crime has he committed?” But they shout all the louder, “Crucify him!”

Then Mark gives the real reason for the verdict: “Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them.” Pilate wasn’t convinced Jesus was guilty. He just wanted the noise to stop. Like Herod with John the Baptist, a powerful man did something terrible because he was afraid of what people would think.

And Barabbas walks free. A guilty man released because an innocent one takes his place. If you want a picture of what the cross means, it’s right there.

The soldiers take Jesus into the palace and call the whole company together. They dress Him in purple, twist a crown of thorns onto His head, and mock Him, saluting Him as king of the Jews. They hit Him with a staff, spit on Him, and kneel in fake worship. They thought they were mocking a fraud. They were actually kneeling before the King of the universe.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Crucifixion**
>
> Rome used crucifixion for slaves, rebels, and the lowest criminals. It was designed to be slow, public, and humiliating, a warning to anyone watching. Victims were usually flogged first, which could cause massive blood loss. Roman citizens were generally exempt. The cross was so shameful that polite Romans avoided even talking about it. That makes it astonishing that the first Christians made a cross the center of their message.

On the way out, the soldiers force a passerby to carry the cross: "A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus." Why mention his sons? Probably because Mark's readers knew them. Paul greets a man named Rufus in his letter to the Romans. Simon was just coming in from the country. He ended up carrying the cross of Jesus, and it seems his family became followers.

They bring Jesus to Golgotha, "the place of the skull." They offer Him wine mixed with myrrh, a kind of painkiller, but He refuses it. He would face this fully awake. "And they crucified him." Mark doesn't describe the nails. He doesn't need to. His readers knew.

The soldiers divide His clothes. The charge is posted above Him: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They meant it as a joke. It was the truest sign ever written.

Everyone mocks Him. People passing by: "come down from the cross and save yourself!" The chief priests: "He saved others… but he can't save himself!" Without meaning to, they said the gospel. He couldn't save others and Himself at the same time. He chose others. "Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Even the men crucified next to Him insult Him.

At noon, darkness covers the land for three hours. Then Jesus cries out in Aramaic, and Mark preserves the words: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

These are the first words of Psalm 22, a psalm of terrible suffering that ends in trust and victory. But the cry is real. On the cross, Jesus was bearing the full weight of human sin, and He experienced the

separation from God that sin deserves. He was forsaken so that we would never have to be.

"With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last." And immediately, "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." Remember the first chapter? At Jesus' baptism, heaven was "torn open." Now the temple curtain, which separated the Most Holy Place from everyone else, is torn. From top to bottom: this was God's doing. The way into God's presence was open.

And who sees it first? Not a priest. Not a disciple. A Roman soldier. The centurion standing in front of the cross sees how Jesus dies, and he says what no one else in Mark has said (it's the Key Verse below).

This is the climax of Mark's Gospel. Remember the first verse: "the Son of God." Demons had said it, and Jesus silenced them. The Father had said it, from heaven. But the first human being in Mark to say it out loud is a Gentile executioner, and he says it not after a miracle, but after watching Jesus die. The secret is out, and it's revealed at the cross.

Meanwhile, the women are watching from a distance. Mary Magdalene, another Mary, Salome, and many others. The men have run. The women stayed. A respected council member named Joseph of Arimathea "went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body." He wraps it in linen and lays it in a tomb cut out of rock, then rolls a stone across the entrance. And two of the women see exactly where He was laid.

KEY VERSE

And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Mark 15:39 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent but gave in to the crowd. What does it look like to do the right thing when everyone around you is shouting the opposite?
2. The chief priests said, "He saved others... but he can't save himself!" How is that mockery actually the truth about the cross?
3. Why do you think the first person in Mark to call Jesus "the Son of God" out loud is a Roman soldier at the cross?

CHAPTER 20

Trembling and Bewildered

Mark 16

Early Sunday morning, just after sunrise, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome walk to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body. They're not expecting a resurrection. They're expecting a corpse. On the way they're worried about a practical problem: who is going to roll the stone away from the entrance?

When they look up, the stone, "which was very large," has already been rolled away.

Inside, they see a young man in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they're alarmed. He tells them not to be alarmed. They're looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. "He has risen! He is not here."

Notice how plain it is. No fireworks. Just an empty shelf of stone where a body should have been. He has risen.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Women Witnesses Matter**

In the first-century world, the testimony of women was often treated as less reliable than a man's, and in many settings it wasn't accepted in court. If you were inventing a resurrection story to convince people, you would not make women your first witnesses. Yet all four Gospels say women discovered the empty tomb. That's the kind of awkward detail that suggests the writers were reporting what happened, not what would sound most convincing.

Then the young man says something that should make you stop: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

"And Peter." Out of all the disciples, Peter is named. The one who swore he would never deny Jesus, and then did it three times. The one who broke down and wept by the fire. Jesus made sure he got a personal invitation. If this Gospel really is based on Peter's preaching, imagine him telling crowds about this moment. "And Peter." That was me. He still wanted me.

Then comes the most surprising ending of any Gospel: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."

That's where the earliest manuscripts of Mark end. With fear. With silence. With the women running.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Endings of Mark**
>
> The oldest and most reliable manuscripts we have of Mark end at 16:8. Some later manuscripts add a longer ending (16:9–20), and a few have a short alternative ending. Most scholars, including many committed evangelical scholars, think verses 9–20 were added by early Christians who summarized resurrection appearances also found in the other Gospels and Acts. Your Bible likely includes them with a note, and the NIV itself notes that the earliest manuscripts do not have them. Nothing central to the Christian faith depends on these verses alone: the resurrection, the appearances, and the Great Commission are all taught clearly elsewhere in Scripture.

Why would Mark end with fear? Some think the original ending was lost. Others think Mark ended there on purpose, and that's worth thinking about. All through this book, people have responded to Jesus with amazement, fear, and confusion. The disciples kept missing it. And now the story stops with the message unfinished,

like a door left open. Mark knew his readers already knew the women eventually spoke, because otherwise no one would have heard about the empty tomb. The question at the end isn't really about them. It's about you. You've heard the news. Jesus is risen. What will you do with it?

The longer ending, as many Bibles print it, summarizes what happened next. Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene, "out of whom he had driven seven demons." She tells the mourning disciples, but they don't believe her. He appears to two disciples walking in the country; again, the others don't believe. Finally He appears to the Eleven and rebukes them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe the people who had seen Him. Even after the resurrection, the theme continues: the people closest to Jesus were slow to believe.

Then He sends them: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." He is taken up into heaven, and "he sat at the right hand of God." And the last line shows the result: "Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them."

The same scared, slow, doubting, runaway disciples become the ones who carry the message to the world. Including Peter. Including, if the early church was right, the young man who ran away in the dark and later wrote this book.

So here's the real ending of Mark. It's an invitation. The tomb is empty. Jesus has gone ahead. He wants His disciples, and Peter, and you.

KEY VERSE

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him."

Mark 16:6 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Out of all the disciples, the messenger named Peter. What does that tell you about how Jesus treats people who have failed Him?
2. The earliest manuscripts end with the women afraid and silent. Why might Mark end the story that way? What would you do with the news?
3. The disciples who ran away became the ones who told the world. How does their story give you hope about your own weaknesses?

TRY THIS *Read the whole Gospel of Mark in one sitting. It takes about an hour and a half. Watch for every time someone asks, "Who is this?"*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just raced through the whole Gospel of Mark. You've seen Jesus heal the untouchable, silence storms and demons, confront the experts, welcome children and beggars, pray in anguish in a garden, die on a Roman cross, and leave an empty tomb behind. Now the question Jesus asked His disciples is the question He asks you: "But what about you?... Who do you say I am?"

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and God is King.

You weren't an accident. God created you to know Him, love Him, and live under His good rule. That's what Jesus meant when He announced, "The kingdom of God has come near."

2 We've all rebelled.

Remember Jesus' list of what comes out of the human heart: envy, arrogance, deceit, and the rest? Nobody is clean on the inside. Not the Pharisees, not the disciples, not you or me. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it.

On the cross, Jesus, the only person who ever lived a perfect life, took our place. Like Barabbas, the guilty go free because the innocent One is condemned. Jesus said He came "to give his life as a ransom for many." Then He rose from the dead, proving His payment was accepted and death was beaten.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Remember the rich man who asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Salvation isn't a checklist you complete. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus. "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Following Jesus means turning around.

Jesus' first message in Mark was, "Repent and believe the good news!" That means turning from running your own life and turning to Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. Peter failed spectacularly, and the angel at the tomb still said, "tell his disciples and Peter." It means you belong to Him now.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. Remember the father who said, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" Jesus answered that prayer. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus is Your Son, the King, that He gave His life as a ransom for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Where I believe, make my faith stronger; where I doubt, help my unbelief. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. The healed man in Mark 5 was told to go home and tell his own people. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Mark straight through in a Bible. It takes about an hour and a half. Then keep going with another Gospel.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized; Jesus Himself was baptized at the very start of Mark.

Talk to God every day. Jesus got up while it was still dark to pray. You don't have to start that early, but start. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Mark doesn't hide how slow the disciples were to believe. Even after the resurrection, some of them refused to believe at first. Jesus didn't give up on them. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because in Mark, the people who thought they had Jesus figured out missed Him. Don't be one of them.

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.

Jesus, Mark 10:45 (NIV)