

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

by Robert C. Walton

THE GOSPEL OF MARK I

Introduction; Mark 1

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest and most concise of the accounts of the ministry of Jesus given to us in Scripture. We will begin our study with a brief overview of background issues associated with the Gospel, then move on to chapter one, with the intention of going through the Gospel at the rate of a chapter per week.

AUTHORSHIP

That the Gospel before us was written by John Mark is rarely questioned, even by most liberal critics. Several independent sources in the Early Church attest to the fact that Mark wrote the book, including Eusebius, who in his *Ecclesiastical History* quotes Papias, a second-century writer, to the effect that Mark had written his Gospel with information he had gotten from listening to Peter preach. A late second-century *Anti-Marcionite Prologue* to an edition of the Gospel, the description of the book in the *Muratorian Canon* (late second century), and a reference in the writings of Irenaeus (around 200) all are clear in affirming that Mark wrote the book. From another angle, if the Church were going to make up a Gospel and attribute it to a famous person, why choose someone as obscure as Mark?

As far as our knowledge of Mark himself is concerned, the New Testament tells us very little. We know his family lived in Jerusalem, because it was at his mother's house that the Jerusalem church gathered to pray for the release of Peter from prison (Acts 12:12). Some have suggested that Mark's mother's house could have been the "upper room" where the Last Supper was held and where the followers of Jesus gathered on the day of Pentecost, but while this is certainly a possibility, it can never be more than speculation. Some have also suggested that Mark was the young man described in Mark 14:51-52 (who would have known about this except the young man himself?), which would also imply that Mark had been an eyewitness to at least some of the events at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, but again this is mere speculation.

We do know that Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas, who was his cousin, on a trip to Antioch (Acts 12:25), and later on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:5), though we are not told what his duties were. He didn't last long, however, and left Paul and Barnabas when they arrived in Perga (Acts 13:13). This act of desertion, for which no reason is given, upset Paul so much that when Barnabas suggested taking Mark on the second missionary journey, Paul refused, and the two split up, with Barnabas taking Mark on a voyage to Cyprus while Paul chose Silas to accompany him (Acts 15:36-39). Mark was later reconciled to Paul, however, and served as his helper during both of his Roman imprisonments (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; II Timothy 4:11). Mark was also Peter's companion in Rome (I Peter 5:13). Later traditions speak of him traveling to Egypt following the deaths of Peter and Paul and founding the great church in Alexandria.

DATE

Little attention was paid to the Gospel of Mark in the early years of biblical scholarship, largely due to the fact that Augustine asserted that the Gospel was nothing more than an abridged version of Matthew (despite the fact that, when common narratives are compared, Mark's is almost always more detailed). In the nineteenth century, however, with the advent of liberal criticism, Mark became the focus of great attention in Gospel studies. Because its emphasis on the humanity of Christ fit the theological presuppositions of the liberals, it came to be generally accepted that Mark was the earliest of the Gospels, a pure historical narrative that was embellished by the later Gospel writers for their own theological purposes (later scholars went even further, asserting that Mark was based on an oral tradition that came to be circulated in written form as a series of sayings of Jesus called *Q*, thus separating Mark's Gospel by several stages from any hint of historicity). Such conclusions, based as they are on blatantly unscriptural presuppositions and backed by not one shred of documentary evidence, must be rejected. The historical sources we do have, particularly Irenaeus and the *Anti-Marcionite Prologue*, tell us that the Gospel was written after the deaths of Peter and Paul, and there is no reason to question the accuracy of this information. The fact that the book makes no mention of the fall of Jerusalem indicates that it was probably written before 70 AD, thus placing it in the late sixties.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

We know that Mark was in Rome in the early to mid-sixties because he is mentioned in the late writings of Peter and Paul as having been with them there. In 64 AD, a large portion of the city of Rome burned to the ground, and many fingers pointed at the emperor, Nero, who had publicly expressed the desire to undertake massive new building projects in the city, including an enormous temple in honor of himself. Nero thus needed a scapegoat and turned to the Christians, who were generally disliked anyway, as the group to take the blame. A brief but fierce persecution of Christians broke out in the city, during which Peter and Paul were martyred and many Christians suffered gruesome deaths in the arena and as human torches to light Nero's gardens at night. Thus the most probable historical context for the book is the persecution being suffered by the Roman church in the mid-sixties. Scholars have long suspected, because of the nature of the language used in the book (see below), that it was intended for a Roman audience, but the question as to whether it was an evangelistic tract aimed at unbelievers (as John's Gospel clearly was) or a narrative intended to encourage a persecuted church by reminding them about the central role played by the suffering of Christ in the Gospel message (and Mark certainly does come back frequently to what Jesus said about suffering) remains an open one. If the former, the emphasis on the humanity and servanthood of Christ could have constituted an appeal to the powerful Romans, for whom no one without position was worthy of serious consideration; if the latter, the emphasis on the humanity of Christ could have been intended to counter the dualistic heresies that were already creeping into the church, denying that God could ever really become man (see Paul's thrust in Colossians, for instance).

LANGUAGE

The language of the Gospel of Mark is rough and simple (it is usually the first Bible translation assignment given to students of elementary Greek) with a limited vocabulary. It shows signs of having been written by someone for whom Greek was not his native language. The grammatical structure of the book is strongly influenced by Hebrew and especially Aramaic, with linear sentences rather than the plethora of subordinate clauses favored by the Greeks. The writer also was clearly familiar with Latin, since he frequently transliterates Latin words and phrases directly into Greek. On the other hand, direct quotations from Jesus (i.e., Aramaic phrases) and terms associated with Jewish life are invariably explained, as if the audience would have no idea what these things meant without editorial elaboration. Despite the author's lack of familiarity with Greek, the style of the book is vigorous and powerful. This may be seen most clearly in the fact that the author often lapses into the historical present (using the present tense to describe past events to bring a certain immediacy to the audience's perceptions and draw them into the narrative) and the frequent use of the word *immediately*.

MARK 1

The first chapter of the Gospel gives us both a summary and a sampling of the first year and a half of Jesus' public ministry (many chronologies for the life of Christ have been proposed over the years, but I'll be following one that places the beginning of His ministry in the fall of 29 AD). We only have time today for a few brief comments on the chapter.

- verse 1- Mark includes no birth narrative, nor does he give us information about Jesus' early years.
- verses 2-8 - A quick summary of the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus who proclaimed Him to the people.
- verses 9-11 - Jesus' baptism.
- verses 12-13 - Jesus is tempted by Satan. Mark gives no details, but strangely mentions that Jesus "was with the wild animals." Could this have been intended to comfort the persecuted Roman Christians, some of whom were being sent into the arena with wild beasts?
- verses 14-15 - These two verses summarize the first full year of Jesus' ministry (30 AD). Other Gospel writers tell us that during this time, Jesus performed His first miracle at Cana, cleansed the Temple, met with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, and traveled throughout Galilee. At this point, His message differs little from that of John the Baptist.
- verses 16-20 - We are now in the early part of 31 AD, and Jesus has relocated to Capernaum after being rejected in Nazareth. Here the first four disciples, whom Jesus had already met in Judea, are called away from their fishing business by Jesus (this is the same incident where Jesus tells them to cast off from shore and, following His instructions, they bring in a huge catch).
- verses 21-28 - Mark is now done summarizing and starts getting down to specifics. From this point on, his narrative includes much more detail - often more than that found in the other Synoptics. Here we find Jesus casting out a demon in the synagogue in Capernaum,

and Mark makes special note of the authority with which Jesus spoke and acted. We should notice that the listeners marveled at His authority before He cast out the demon; His very manner of speech, in contrast to the scribal habit of citing the authority of famous rabbis of the past, captured their attention even before He performed the miracle. Note also the fact that the demon speaks truthfully about Christ - an issue we will examine more closely when we get to the story of the Gadarene demoniac in Mark 5.

- verses 29-34 - That same day, Jesus went to the home of Andrew and Peter, where He found that Peter's mother-in-law was seriously ill. He healed her, and she got up to prepare their dinner. He then healed many others who came to the door, casting out demons as well as curing the sick.
- verses 35-39 - Jesus, despite the fact that He must have been exhausted, got up early to pray, then embarked on another preaching tour through Galilee.
- verses 40-45 - One of the frequent themes in Mark's Gospel is the "secret Messiah." Why did Jesus tell the leper He healed to keep quiet, aside from the obvious hindrance to His ministry that resulted? As we will see in our later studies, such commands had much to do with Jesus' movement toward His ultimate purpose - His death on the cross. At this point, "His hour had not yet come." Too much publicity too soon would arouse too much opposition, and it was not yet time for Him to die.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK II

Mark 2:1-3:6

The four accounts we will consider today take place in the late spring and early summer of 31 AD. In this narrative, Mark omits Jesus' visit to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, during which he healed the lame man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5).

HEALING A PARALYTIC (2:1-12 cf. Matthew 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26)

- verse 1 - After a short time off by Himself, Jesus returns to Capernaum (note the use of "home" - Jesus had taken up residence in the town). We are not told whose house He was staying in.
- verse 2 - A large crowd quickly gathers, and Jesus preaches to them.
- verses 3-4 - Four men carried a paralyzed man on a rectangular mat, seeking healing for their friend. Unable to get near Jesus because of the crowd, they took the man on the pallet up on the roof, removed some of the tiles (no, they didn't wreck the house), and lowered him down into the room where Jesus was. Note that Palestinian houses in those days were made of baked clay and had flat roofs that were often used in the same way we use porches or patios.
- verse 5 - There are several interesting things to note about this verse. First of all, Jesus responds to the need of the paralyzed man because of *the faith of his friends*. This should be an encouragement to us when we pray for those we love who are outside the Kingdom.

Secondly, Jesus does not immediately heal the man, but declares that his sins are forgiven. We find that Jesus routinely ignores what counselors today call "presentation problems." Instead of addressing what people believe their needs to be, Jesus goes immediately to the heart of the problem. It was the man's spiritual malady rather than his physical one that really needed healing. Again, this speaks to the issue of how we pray. Do we spend our time bringing "presentation problems" before God, or do we get to the heart of the matter?

- verses 6-7 - The teachers of the law, called *scribes* in some translations, were men who dedicated themselves to making copies of the Scriptures for use in the synagogues. They did exceptionally careful and accurate work (Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts and Masoretic Text copies from a thousand years later are virtually identical), and in the process gained a reputation for knowing God's Word so well that they were looked upon as authorities on its contents. Here they find Jesus' words objectionable. They were right, of course - no one but God can forgive sins. Their problem was that they drew the wrong conclusion from what they had heard; they concluded that, since no one but God can forgive sins, Jesus was blaspheming, but they should have concluded that since no one but God can forgive sins, Jesus was God. In the same situation, we probably would have done what they did, however. Only the eyes of faith can see beyond what would be considered perfectly sound human reasoning.
- verses 8-9 - The teachers of the law had to this point said nothing, but Jesus knew what they were thinking. He asks a very good question. Ask your students to answer it. They should

realize that it is easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” because such a statement cannot be tested or verified empirically.

- verses 10-12 - Jesus then uses the healing of the paralytic to provide empirical evidence of His power to forgive sins. Like many of the miracles of Jesus, this is intended, not only to show mercy to a person in need, but also to verify His identity and authenticate His message.

THE CALLING OF LEVI (2:13-17 cf. Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 5:27-32)

- verses 13-14 - Capernaum is located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus left town and headed for the shore of the lake, and on the way passed a toll booth (tax collectors often set up booths along well-traveled roads to collect duties from merchants and traveling caravans). Tax collectors in the Roman Empire were in reality tax farmers - they were hired to collect taxes on a given route or in a particular district and given a specific amount that they were to turn in to the Roman authorities at the end of the year. Their salaries consisted of whatever they were able to collect over and above that amount. It was no wonder, then, that these men were looked upon as traitors and cheats by the Jewish people. The booth in this case was manned by Levi, also known as Matthew, and he becomes the fifth man specifically called by Jesus to follow Him.
- verses 15-16 - Matthew invited Jesus and His disciples home for dinner, and invited many of his disreputable friends also (the term *sinners* was a technical one, used for those who did not observe the rabbinical traditions). Jesus shows none of the reluctance of the religious leaders of the day, who would not be caught dead eating with anyone who was ceremonially unclean.
- verse 17 - Jesus here speaks, not of reality, but of perceptions. We know that all are “sick” and that none is righteous. The religious leaders, however, perceived themselves to be righteous and thus saw no need for Jesus and His message. Refusing to respond, they instead criticized and sought to undermine His work.

RELIGIOUS RITUALS (2:18-22 cf. Matthew 9:14-17; Luke 5:33-39)

- verse 18 - Regular fasting - as often as twice a week - had become part of Jewish religious life by this time, though the Old Testament mandated fasting only on the Day of Atonement. John and his followers observed this practice, but Jesus and His disciples did not. Matthew notes that the question was being asked by John’s disciples, so it was not a challenge, but a sincere desire for understanding.
- verses 19-20 - Jesus compares the time of His earthly ministry to a wedding reception - it is a time of joy and celebration. It would be as foolish to fast while in the company of Jesus as it would be to sit at a wedding reception and eat nothing. But when the bridegroom is taken away, things will be different. Jesus is not here mandating fasting as a regular practice in the life of the Church as much as He is indicating the sorrow that will overwhelm His disciples when He is taken from them.
- verses 21-22 - Jesus illustrates His refusal to observe old traditions. His Gospel is new, and brings with it new forms and observances.

An old garment would have already shrunk as much as it was going to, but a new patch would not have, so putting a new patch on an old piece of clothing would wind up making an even bigger hole when the patch shrank and tore away from the rest of the cloth.

Similarly, wine was carried in goatskins, which were supple and stretched readily when fresh. As the wine fermented and gases were given off, the goatskin could expand to accommodate it. But an old goatskin was one that had become hard and brittle, and putting unfermented wine into it would destroy it; it would crack rather than expanding when the wine fermented.

JESUS AND THE SABBATH (2:23-3:6 cf. Matthew 12:1-17; Luke 6:1-11)

- 2:23-24 - Many of the rabbinical traditions centered on what it meant to keep the Sabbath. Observing the trivia of Pharisaic tradition had become a matter of pride with the spiritual leaders, allowing them to feel superior to others while at the same time exercising power over others. Of course, as we will see in a later chapter, they also knew how to manipulate the traditions for their own benefit. The specific issue here was picking grain, a practice completely within the provisions of the Old Testament law (Deuteronomy 23:25), but according to tradition forbidden on the Sabbath because it was tantamount to reaping and threshing.
- 2:25-26 - The incident to which Jesus referred is recorded in I Samuel 21:6. The point is that Sabbath legislation was never intended to rule out works of necessity.
- 2:27-28 - The tendency of all forms of legalism is to make man the servant of the law rather than the other way around. The law becomes an instrument of oppression rather than something intended to benefit man and enable him to lead a peaceful and happy life. The Sabbath, like the rest of God's law, is intended to be a blessing rather than a burden - a time of rest from the labors of the week rather than a day dominated by tension, fear, and guilt connected with petty technicalities. Jesus, of course, has every right to interpret the true nature of the Sabbath, as He does with any other aspect of the law.
- 3:1-2 - Another Sabbath, and the vultures were in the synagogue, watching to see if Jesus would violate their traditions. We are now near the midpoint of Jesus' public ministry, and opposition among the religious leaders is increasing.
- 3:3-4 - Jesus takes advantage of the situation to make a point. His question is worded in such a way that His critics can't answer without undermining their own traditions, so they remain silent.
- 3:5-6 - Jesus heals the man (the religious leaders considered such healing work, and thus a violation of the Sabbath), and His critics for the first time seriously consider getting rid of Him. Why? Because the traditions were the basis of their power over the people, and His flaunting of those traditions undermined their entire role in society. Besides, He was becoming entirely too popular with the people.

How important are our traditions to us? Do we cling to our distinctives to the extent that we would even seek to undermine the work of God to preserve them? I would hope that this is not the case, but it would not be the first time in the history of the Church that such a thing had happened. Let us beware that the traditions of men not negate the work of God in our own lives and churches by becoming a burden to men and a hindrance to the Gospel.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK III

Mark 3:7-35

The four accounts we will consider today take us through the end of the summer of 31 AD. The incidents omitted by Mark include the Sermon on the Mount (though, because of Matthew's tendency to group similar materials, this may not have been a single sermon; in any case, Mark tends to avoid sermonic material) and the events recorded by Luke in Luke 7.

PREACHING TO THE MULTITUDES (3:7-12 cf. Matthew 12:15-21)

Jesus continues to draw large crowds of people, not only from Galilee, but from all over Palestine. He preached, healed, and cast out demons. Again, note that the demons speak the truth about Him, and He commands them to be silent about His identity.

THE CHOOSING OF THE TWELVE (3:13-19 cf. Luke 6:12-16)

Jesus now chooses twelve men from among those who have been following Him to be His special companions (note that this does not occur until about the midpoint of His public ministry). They are called both *disciples* ("students") and *apostles* ("sent-out ones"). They were given responsibility and authority to preach, heal, and cast out demons. The number twelve is significant because it is the number of the tribes of Israel. As Jesus Himself was the New Israel (Matthew 2:15), so His followers are to be the new people of God. A few comments on the men He chose would be appropriate here. Note that the multiplicity of names used for some of the men have a variety of sources - Greek and Aramaic names, names related to birthplace, parentage, or occupation, or nicknames (e.g., Simon was Peter's given name, but Jesus nicknamed him, calling him Peter in Greek or Cephas in Aramaic). The Sermon on the Mount, containing Jesus' description of the life of the Kingdom, followed shortly after this incident.

- Simon Peter - A fisherman from Bethsaida in Galilee, he became the spokesman among the Twelve; part of Jesus' "inner circle" of intimates. Author of I and II Peter. Supposedly crucified upside-down in Rome between 65 and 68 AD.
- James - Son of Zebedee, with his brother John referred to as the "Sons of Thunder." Fisherman by trade, and with his brother and Peter part of Jesus' inner circle. Executed by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:2), making him the first of the disciples to die a martyr's death.
- John - Son of Zebedee, brother of James. Probably closest to Jesus of all the disciples. Cared for Mary after Jesus' death. Served as an elder in the church in Ephesus after the fall of Jerusalem. Wrote Gospel of John, I John, II John, III John, and the book of Revelation. Died around 95 AD, the only one of the Twelve to die a natural death.
- Andrew - Peter's brother, originally a disciple of John the Baptist. Brought Peter to Jesus. Tradition says he was crucified in Asia Minor.

- Philip - Hellenistic Jewish background (his Greek name indicates this), spoke fluent Greek. Not to be confused with Philip the deacon (Acts 8). Traditionally executed in Asia Minor.
- Bartholomew (Nathanael) - An old man, native of Cana, who tradition says was martyred in Armenia.
- Matthew (Levi) - Jewish tax collector, son of Alphaeus. Author of the Gospel of Matthew. According to tradition, martyred in Syrian Antioch.
- Thomas (Didymus) - One of a set of twins (*Didymus* means “twin”), Thomas was the skeptic of the group. He later went as the first Christian missionary to India, where he founded a group of churches that still exist today and where he was later martyred.
- James, Son of Alphaeus - Matthew’s brother.
- Thaddaeus (Lebbaeus, Judas) - According to tradition, preached and died in Persia.
- Simon the Zealot - Also called Simon the Cananaean - the latter indicates that he came from Cana, while the former indicates his political affiliation - the Zealots were a group of anti-Roman revolutionaries. He and Matthew must have gotten along well. . . .
- Judas Iscariot - From the town of Kerioth in Judea, he was the only non-Galilean disciple. This would not have made it easy for him to get along with the others. Judeans generally viewed Galileans as country bumpkins, while Galileans were often suspicious of the city boys from Judea. They apparently trusted him enough, however, to make him treasurer of the group (wouldn’t Matthew have been a more logical choice?), though he turned out to be a greedy man who stole from their traveling money. After betraying Jesus he committed suicide.

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN (3:20-30 cf. Matthew 12:22-45)

- verses 20-21 - Jesus’ family was not generally sympathetic to His ministry. Mary seems not to have had a great impact on the skepticism of Jesus’ brothers and sisters (Joseph, who is never mentioned after the birth narratives, was probably dead by the time Jesus began His public ministry), though at least some of them, notably James and Jude, were converted after Jesus’ resurrection.
- verse 22 - The religious leaders claim that Jesus is casting out demons in the power of Beelzebub (lit. *Lord of the Flies*, a Syrian deity whose name in Jewish parlance came to be used for the chief of the demonic hosts).
- verses 23-26 - Jesus notes first of all that such a charge is illogical - why would Satan be undermining the work of his own servants? Note also that Abraham Lincoln used the language here for quite different purposes during the Civil War.
- verse 27 - The plundering of Satan’s “house” can only be accomplished by one who is more powerful than Satan. Jesus is thus again claiming deity.

- verses 28-30 - Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit - the unpardonable sin. Of what does it consist? The unpardonable sin, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, is tantamount to persistent rejection of the clear light of God's revelation (cf. Hebrews 6:4-8), and is equivalent to the biblical concept of *apostasy*. Good examples of those who have committed such sin would be the Pharaoh of the Exodus (note that, after he repeatedly hardened his heart against God, the text begins to speak of God hardening his heart) and Judas (who turned away from greater privilege than this man?). One who is concerned about having committed the unpardonable sin clearly has not, since his heart is not hardened against God, but is concerned about his spiritual condition.

FAMILY MATTERS (3:31-35 cf. Matthew 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21)

Jesus downplays physical relationships in favor of spiritual ones. His followers demand His attention more than His family. Those who are in God's family are those who believe and obey. Again, we see that at this point His family is not counted among His followers.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK IV

Mark 4

The four incidents described in Mark 4 take place early in the fall of 31 AD. Both Matthew and Mark appear to group parables here, though they include different ones in their compilations. This should not be viewed as strange since, as Mark tells us, Jesus “did not say anything to them [the multitudes] without using a parable,” so He not only told far more parables than the Gospel writers recorded, but probably used many of them repeatedly as He traveled around Galilee.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (4:1-9 cf. Matthew 13:1-9; Luke 8:4-8)

- verses 1-3 - From the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus could undoubtedly see Galilean farmers scattering seed in the fields on the nearby hills. Farmers in those days sowed before they plowed, so that the seed would then be plowed into the soil.
- verse 4 - Foot paths, hardened by continuous travel, went through many fields. Seeds falling here would be devoured by birds before the plow had a chance to break up the soil.
- verses 5-6 - Much of this portion of Galilee consists of topsoil thinly spread over a limestone shelf. Such conditions permitted rapid growth, but the roots could reach no source of underground water.
- verse 7 - Some plants are choked out by weeds the roots of which were not destroyed by the plow.
- verses 8-9 - Some found fertile soil and were productive.

THE PURPOSE OF PARABLES (4:10-12 cf. Matthew 13:10-17; Luke 8:9-10)

Jesus’ parables had two purposes - to enlighten His followers and to blind unbelievers. Those who know the Gospel of the Kingdom have a great privilege; those who reject it bring greater blindness on themselves. Note that Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9-10, where God told the prophet that no one would listen to his message.

All of this means that the trite definition of a parable as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning,” or the notion that it is a sort of sermon illustration, both fall far short of the actual purpose for which Jesus used them. They were indeed earthly stories - all of Jesus’ parables involve the common experience of His listeners - but they routinely confused and angered the unbelievers who were trying to challenge Jesus’ work, while they at the same time enlightened those who heard them in faith.

INTERPRETING THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (4:13-20 cf. Matthew 13:18-23; Luke 8:11-15)

- verses 13-14 - The seed is the Word of God, and the sower is the one who preaches it.
- verse 15 - The path represents the indifferent hearer whose heart is so hard that the Word never even makes an impression.

- verses 16-17 - The stony ground is the emotional hearer who gets excited initially, but has no spiritual depth and falls away in time of trouble.
- verses 18-19 - The thorny ground is the lukewarm hearer who, though receiving the Word, refuses total commitment, preferring his associations in the world.
- verse 20 - Fertile soil produces fruit, albeit in differing amounts (cf. Galatians 5:22-23). Since Jesus has so often emphasized that a person is known by his fruit, it is only the fertile soil that represents a genuine Christian. The person represented by the path never makes a profession of faith at all, and the stony and thorny ground hearers both refer to false professions.

MORE BRIEF PARABLES (4:21-34 cf. Matthew 13:31-32; Luke 8:16-18; 13:18-19)

- verses 21-23 - In the same way that a lamp is meant to shed light, not to be hidden, so the good news of the Kingdom of God is meant to be spread in the darkness of this world. More pointedly, the secrecy on which Jesus is insisting at this stage of His ministry is not intended to be permanent. The time will come when the Gospel is to be shouted from the housetops.
- verses 24-25 - To whom much is given, of him will much be required. The disciples are in positions of great privilege, and that privilege will ultimately cost them everything. Those who believe what they have heard will also gain unspeakable blessing, but those, like Judas, who reject it will lose all they have. This, of course, is the same point illustrated later in the parable of the Ten Minas (Luke 19:11-27).
- verses 26-29 - The growth of the Kingdom is not something that is ultimately the result of human effort. It is a mystery. The sower plants the seed, but God gives the increase. Man can do no more than wait and reap the harvest when the time is right.
- verses 30-32 - From insignificant beginnings the Kingdom will grow to provide shelter for all who come, but this growth will be gradual.
- verses 33-34 - Again the distinction between the disciples and the crowds - Jesus spoke in obscure language to the multitudes, with some receiving the word in faith but many turning away in anger or confusion. To the disciples, however, He explained things plainly.

CALMING THE STORM (4:35-41 cf. Matthew 8:18, 23-27; Luke 8:22-25)

- verse 35 - After telling the parables, Jesus suggested they cross the Sea of Galilee.
- verse 36 - Jesus was so tired they practically had to carry Him into the boat.
- verse 37 - The Sea of Galilee is prone to sudden, violent tempests (the surface of the lake is 700 feet below sea level, and it is surrounded by hills that serve as a sort of funnel for the wind). This one was so bad that the boat was ready to sink.
- verse 38 - Jesus was sound asleep, so great was his fatigue. The disciples, many of whom were experienced fishermen, were terrified. The parables of the Kingdom hadn't really sunk in; the sowers were not going to die before the seed had been sown.
- verses 39-41 - Jesus commanded the forces of nature and rebuked the faithless disciples. There was still much they had to learn about their Master.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK V

Mark 5

The three incidents described in Mark 5 bring us to the end of the year 31 AD. Take particular note of the violation of the pattern of secrecy in Jesus' dealings with the Gadarene demoniac. The chapter also demonstrates the depths of Jesus' compassion for those who lay their suffering before Him.

THE GADARENE DEMONIAIC (5:1-20 cf. Matthew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39)

- verse 1 - Jesus crossed over to Gadara (called Gergesa in Matthew 8:28), in the region of Decapolis (ten cities settled by Hellenistic Jews east of the Sea of Galilee). This same area is now the hotly-contested Golan Heights.
- verses 2-5 - He was met by a demon-possessed man (Matthew notes that there were actually two of them) who had been living in the caves used for burial near the shore of the lake. He was insane and possessed superhuman strength. Note that demon possession does not always manifest itself in this way. In going through the Gospels, we find demon-possessed people acting in a wide variety of ways.
- verses 6-7 - It is immediately obvious that the demon knows exactly who Jesus is.
- verses 8-10 - The numerous demons possessing the man (a Roman legion consisted of seven thousand men) asked not to be cast into the Pit (cf. Jude 6), but rather to be allowed to remain in the area where their efforts had been so fruitful (it is possible that demons operate territorially - see Daniel 10:13).
- verses 11-13 - Why did Jesus agree to their request? The pigs grazing nearby were, of course, contrary to Jewish dietary regulations, so destroying them was no more than an act of enforcing the law.
- verses 14-17 - The locals cared more for the pigs than they did for the man healed by Jesus.
- verses 18-20 - In this case, continuing witness in the region was essential (Jesus only visited Decapolis once more during His time on earth). The man could do more good telling His own people about Jesus than he could by leaving to follow Jesus as He traveled around the countryside. We must do the work of God where we are before attempting to do it elsewhere.

Why did Jesus tell this man to broadcast what had happened to him after telling so many others to keep quiet? Decapolis, inhabited by Hellenistic Jews, was a region where the Pharisees had no influence, and so publicity would do nothing to arouse greater opposition and hasten Jesus' death.

RAISING JAIRUS' DAUGHTER (5:21-24, 35-43 cf. Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26; Luke 8:40-42, 49-56)

- verses 21-24 - Jairus, one of the elders in the synagogue in Capernaum, begs Jesus to heal his dying daughter, meanwhile showing the greatest possible respect for Him.
- verse 35 - Jairus' friends told him it was no longer necessary to bother Jesus (perhaps the delay to deal with the woman in the street had made the difference?).
- verse 36 - Jesus overheard and encouraged Jairus.
- verse 37 - Jesus took only His "inner circle" with Him.

- verses 38-40 - The professional mourners (it was common practice to hire professionals for such occasions - the more noise, the wealthier the family must have been) were rather cynical, to say the least.
- verse 41 - Mark here quotes, then translates for his Roman audience, Jesus' Aramaic phrase (*talitha koum* means "little girl, get up").
- verse 43 - Secrecy again emphasized (back in Capernaum, where the situation is much different than it was in Decapolis); note Jesus' compassion in dealing with practical matters.

THE WOMAN WITH THE HEMORRHAGE (5:25-34 cf. Matthew 9:20-22; Luke 8:43-48)

- verse 25 - This woman, for reasons unknown, had suffered with menstrual bleeding for twelve years. This rendered her perpetually ceremonially unclean, to say nothing of the pain and messiness involved.
- verse 26 - She had spent all her money on doctors, who had made her worse instead of better (why doesn't Luke mention this fact?).
- verse 27-28 - Her faith was such that she thought a touch would be enough.
- verse 29 - She touched Jesus' cloak in the crowd and was healed immediately.
- verse 30 - Jesus, of course, knew what had happened.
- verse 31 - The disciples thought Jesus' question rather foolish since people were pressing all around Him as He walked through the streets. Jairus must have been getting increasingly frantic as every lost second slipped by.
- verse 32-34 - Jesus comforted her; He cared little for ceremonial impurity.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK VI

Mark 6

The five incidents described in Mark 6 cover the spring and early summer of the year 32 AD. Mark omits no significant incidents covered in the other Gospels, though he does not include the sermon on the Bread of Life from John 6:22-71, which follows shortly after the account of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee with which this chapter ends.

REJECTION AT NAZARETH (6:1-6 cf. Matthew 13:54-58)

- verse 1 - This is Jesus' second and last recorded visit to the town where He grew up after He embarked on His public ministry. The reception this time is no better than it was earlier (Luke 4:14-30).
- verse 2 - These questions come, not from curiosity, but from skepticism.
- verse 3 - Jesus Himself had evidently learned His father's trade. His family (apparently quite large) was well known in the area. Among those mentioned here, two later became leaders in the Early Church and are significant. James wrote the book of James, led the early Jerusalem church, and headed the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, while Judas wrote the book of Jude.
- verse 4 - Jesus apparently was rejected even by His own family.
- verses 5-6 - He could do little for those He wanted to help the most because of their lack of faith. Note that the use of the word *could* should not be construed as opening to question the sovereign power of Jesus as the Son of God, since He on other occasions did great works on behalf of those who displayed no prior faith. But we should also recognize that miracles do not stand on their own, and miracles done outside a context of faith often brought no more than scorn, and sometimes even produced blasphemous retorts, as we saw in 3:22.

THE TOUR OF THE TWELVE (6:7-13 cf. Matthew 9:35-11:1; Luke 9:1-6)

Matthew's Gospel recounts Jesus' instructions to His disciples in considerable detail, but Mark gives only a few brief elements of His commission to them.

- verse 7 - Jesus sent His disciples out to preach in pairs and gave them authority over demons (note that only Christ can give such authority; no man can claim it as his own).
- verse 8-9 - They were to travel light and take no provisions. From the very beginning, those who ministered the Gospel were to live by the Gospel.
- verses 10-11 - They were not to go "shopping" for the best lodgings, but stay with whoever would receive them. If no one would receive them, they were to move on to the next town, indicating by shaking the dust from their feet that the judgment that would fall on those who rejected the Gospel would be on their own heads. It is worth noting, of course, that they were *not* to react to rejection by continuing to plead and manipulate people's emotions until they responded, at least in some outward way, to the message of the Gospel.
- verses 12-13 - Preaching, healing, and exorcism all met with success. We shouldn't miss the fact that Judas was among those who were doing this - a clear illustration of Matthew 7:21-23.

THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (6:14-29 cf. Matthew 14:1-12; Luke 9:7-9)

- verses 14-16 - As Jesus became more and more well-known, word of His exploits spread to the palace of Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, who had earlier had John the Baptist executed. This superstitious ruler still felt guilty about the way he had treated John and was now sure he was being haunted. Mark now uses a literary technique that is rare in Scripture - flashback.
- verses 17-18 - The family situation here was complicated, to say the least (see chart and list below). Antipas was a son of Herod the Great (one of only four who survived his wanton massacres); Herodias was the daughter of another of Herod the Great's children, thus was Antipas' niece; upon marrying Philip, Antipas' brother, she became his sister-in-law; but she was an ambitious woman and wanted to be a queen, so she left Philip (without benefit of divorce) and married Antipas. This relationship was one of the greatest scandals in the Roman Empire of that day; John wasn't the only one who spoke against it.
- verses 19-20 - Herodias wanted John killed, but Herod would not do it. He knew John had done nothing wrong, did not want to antagonize the people, with whom John was very popular, and enjoyed listening to John preach (in a curious sort of way).
- verse 21 - Herod's birthday party - a drunken orgy.
- verses 22-23 - Salome, Herodias' daughter by Philip, now in her late teens, performed the type of lewd dance common at such parties (what was *not* common was that it should be performed by a member of the royal family). Herod, in a drunken stupor, promised her anything she wanted.
- verses 24-25 - She checked with her mother, who saw the opportunity to get her revenge at last.
- verses 26-28 - Herod sobered up quickly, but it was too late; he couldn't afford to lose face before all his friends. The party was being held in the Machaerus fortress, where John was imprisoned in the dungeon below, so the order was promptly carried out.
- verse 29 - John's disciples then buried the body.

NOTES ON THE HEROD FAMILY

HEROD THE GREAT (ruled 37-4 BC) - With the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, the Roman world descended into civil war. The conspirators, led by Cassius and Brutus, were aligned against the members of the Second Triumvirate. Antipater and his sons, shrewdly seeking to anticipate the outcome of the struggle, threw their support behind the conspirators. With the victory of the Triumvirate at Philippi in 41 BC, quick maneuvering was necessary. Herod paid heavy bribes to Mark Antony in order to gain his favor and stay in power. After driving back a Parthian invasion, Herod was confirmed as King of the Jews in 37 BC. Dissension among the members of the Triumvirate soon brought confusion to Rome once more. Herod supported his friend Antony, but again chose the wrong side. The defeat of Antony at Actium in 31 BC left Octavian (later Augustus) undisputed master of the Roman world. Herod, seeking to preserve his position, fled to Octavian and sought to convince him that his loyalty to Antony was a desirable virtue and that Octavian needed rulers under him who knew how to be loyal. Somewhat surprisingly, Octavian agreed, and Herod was reappointed as King of the Jews.

Herod, as an Idumaean (Edomite), was never really accepted by his Jewish subjects. Though a shrewd and capable ruler, he got little but bitterness from those he ruled. He sought the favor of the Jews in many ways. His attempt to legitimize his position through marriage to the Hasmonean princess Mariamne only brought political intrigue into his own household. His beautiful building projects, including the renovation of the Temple - a project started in 20 BC and not completed until 64 AD, only six years before it was destroyed by the Roman general Titus - failed to win him favor because he also built gymnasiums and amphitheaters, symbols of Roman culture despised by the Jews.

During his eventful career, Herod had ten wives and produced numerous children. His home life was far from happy, however. His jealous nature made him increasingly paranoid about his wives and his throne. He divorced his first wife, Doris, in order to marry Mariamne, whom he seems genuinely to have loved. During the tumultuous years of unrest, however, he left word on at least two occasions that Mariamne was to be killed if he failed to return from a meeting abroad - he could not bear the thought of her marrying someone else. She found out about these orders, which obviously did not contribute to tranquility on the home front. Ultimately, Herod wound up executing Mariamne, her mother, and her uncle on suspicion of disloyalty. Later, he had three of his sons (Antipater, Alexander, and Aristobulus) executed for plotting to take the throne. This behavior, combined with Herod's attempts to impress the Jews by keeping their laws, once caused Augustus to remark, "I would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son."

In light of this behavior, his jealous rage at receiving the message of the wise men and his order to exterminate the infants of Bethlehem come as no surprise. In fact, one report indicates that, before his death, Herod ordered the leading men of every village gathered together in a hippodrome. He left orders that, upon word of his death, the hippodrome was to be burned to the ground, thus assuring that there would be mourning throughout the land when Herod died (the orders weren't carried out, by the way).

ARCHELAUS - When Herod the Great died, he divided his kingdom among three of his four surviving sons. Archelaus became the ruler of Judea. He took after his father, and his attitude caused Mary and Joseph to return with Jesus to Nazareth after leaving Egypt. When Archelaus died in 6 AD, he was replaced by a series of prefects, Roman officials sent by the emperor, one of whom was Pontius Pilate.

PHILIP - Philip was the only son of Herod the Great who had no political ambition. He used his considerable wealth to live the good life in his country villa and stayed out of the political squabbles that dominated the lives of the rest of his family. His wife, however, had other ideas. Her name was Herodias, the daughter of the dead Aristobulus. She married her uncle to gain status, but found his lack of ambition insufferably boring. They had one daughter, the notorious Salome. Herodias finally left Philip and married another uncle, Herod Antipas, thus bringing down the wrath of John the Baptist, who condemned the marriage, which was a source of gossip as far away as Rome.

HEROD ANTIPAS - This son of Herod the Great ruled Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to 39 AD. He was more popular with the Jews than his father had been and was interested in the Jewish religion in a superstitious sort of way. He was the one who, under the prodding of Herodias, had John the Baptist arrested, then was coerced by Salome into having him executed after making a drunken promise at his birthday party. He was also the man to whom Pilate sent Jesus for trial. Herod thought Jesus was a magician and was disappointed when Jesus refused to do any miracles for him.

HEROD PHILIP - He ruled Iturea from 4 BC to 34 AD. His only connection with the biblical narrative is the fact that he married Salome. He was her uncle on her father's side and great-uncle on her mother's side!

HEROD AGRIPPA I - The brother of Herodias was the ruler of Judea from 37-44 AD. He was a personal friend of the Roman emperor Claudius and had ambitions of eventually ruling all of Palestine. He was the Herod who executed James the son of Zebedee and imprisoned Peter. He was also the one who, after receiving praise as a god, was struck down by God and died of an intestinal parasite.

HEROD AGRIPPA II - The son of Herod Agrippa I ruled Judea from 52-70 AD. He was the King Agrippa before whom Paul gave his testimony. His sister Bernice, with whom he was rumored to have an incestuous relationship, was also present at Paul's trial. His other sister Drusilla married the Roman governor Felix, who also was involved with Paul's case.

THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND (6:30-46 cf. Matthew 14:13-23; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15)

We now move into the summer of 32 AD. This is the only miracle performed by Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospels. It must therefore be terribly significant. In fact, it is a major turning point in Jesus' ministry; after this, He spends very little time with the crowds and concentrates almost entirely on His disciples.

- verse 30 - Jesus' disciples report back after their preaching tour.
- verses 31-33 - They are tired and so is Jesus, so they go off into a deserted place to get some much-needed rest. The crowds, however, pursue them on foot around the lake and are waiting for Jesus when He lands on the shore.
- verse 34 - Jesus ignores His own fatigue and speaks to the crowd (His servants should expect that the same will often be their experience).
- verses 35-36 - The disciples want their break and ask Jesus to send the crowds away.

- verse 37 - Jesus' response confuses the disciples, who know they cannot come close to affording to feed such a huge number of people (two hundred denarii represented about eight months' wages for a common laborer).
- verse 38 - Jesus sends them out into the crowd to see how much food is available, and they return with a pittance - five dinner rolls and two sardines. But Jesus wants His disciples to use what they have instead of worrying about what they don't have.
- verses 39-44 - A pittance becomes a feast in the hands of the Master. Jesus blesses the food, has the disciples distribute it, and five thousand men (plus women and children) are satisfied, with plenty left over. Similarly, when we distribute the Bread of Life, it is not how much we have, but what Jesus does with it that matters. Note that John gives the reason why this incident is so important - the people are so amazed by what they see that they want to take Jesus and make Him king by force. They clearly missed the whole point of His Messiahship; He did not come into the world to fill stomachs and overthrow the Romans. Jesus brings this truth home forcefully in the Bread of Life sermon, which drives the insincere followers away.

JESUS WALKS ON WATER (6:47-56 cf. Matthew 14:24-36; John 6:16-21)

- verses 45-46 - Jesus sent His disciples off in the boat and sent the crowds away while He remained alone to pray (remember, He still had not gotten that "break" for which He and His disciples had been seeking).
- verses 47-48 - Jesus' disciples were struggling against another one of those notorious Sea of Galilee storms, and He walked across the water to join them. Note that, just as the day was divided into 12 hours from sunrise to sunset (about 6 AM to 6 PM), the night was divided into four "watches" of three hours each. The fourth watch was from 3:00 AM to 6:00 AM; thus Jesus prayed until about 3:00 AM, then began walking across the water toward the disciples (John 6:19 notes that they were 25 or 30 furlongs away from the shore - about 3-3.5 miles, or near the middle of the lake).
- verses 49-52 - The superstitious disciples were more frightened by Jesus than they were by the storm, but He climbs aboard and calms both them and the weather. They clearly had not understood the nature of His Messiahship either.
- verses 53-56 - Jesus returns to Decapolis, where He had healed the Gadarene demoniac, and is immediately mobbed. The difference in their response this time was due to the obedience of the man out of whom the demons had been cast; he had clearly done what Jesus had asked him to do, proclaiming throughout the region what the Lord had done for him.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK VII

Mark 7

The three incidents described in Mark 7 continue the narrative of Jesus' ministry in the summer of the year 32 AD. Mark omits no significant incidents covered in the other Gospels.

LEGALISM OF THE PHARISEES (7:1-23 cf. Matthew 15:1-20)

- verse 1 - The increasing uproar concerning Jesus brought scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem to check Him out. They may have been seeking grounds for the Sanhedrin to press charges against Him.
- verses 2-5 - The Pharisees found fault because the disciples failed to perform the ceremonial ablutions prescribed by the rabbis. These "washings" (literally *baptisms* - note that this use of the term is cited by supporters of sprinkling or pouring rather than immersion) involved pouring water over hands or vessels for eating. This was necessary to remove any ceremonial defilement (after coming from the marketplace, one surely would have had contact with *some* unclean person). We must note again that their main concern was with externals rather than the condition of the heart.
- verses 6-9 - Jesus, quoting Isaiah 29:13, makes the point that adding to God's law destroys it just as surely as taking away from it. Why is this? Because anyone who adds to God's law makes the added traditions the "spectacles" through which the law is interpreted, thus distorting the purity and perfection of what God has given.
- verses 10-13 - Jesus then gives a concrete example of their hypocrisy. The practice of *Corban* ("dedication") was promoted by the Pharisees as a means of circumventing the Fifth Commandment. In practice, it worked something like a will. Anything declared to be *Corban* - a sacred offering - would pass into the Temple treasury when a person died, but would remain in that person's hands as long as he lived. However, it would be a profanation of the gift to give it to another - say, to support indigent parents. Thus the Pharisees used this tradition to keep their goods for themselves rather than using them to support elderly and needy family members. This, of course, is one of the other problems with adding man-made traditions to God's law - the ones who make the traditions usually create loopholes for their own benefit. It is entirely inappropriate to use honor for God as a way to get around honoring one's parents.
- verses 14-16 - In one fell swoop, Jesus undercuts much of the Old Testament ceremonial legislation, including the dietary laws. While God's moral law is eternal, the ceremonial law was intended to point forward to the work of Christ, and therefore was only temporary - when Christ fulfilled it, it was no longer needed.
- verses 17-19 - The body cleanses whatever comes into it, rejecting whatever is not useful as waste material.
- verses 20-23 - But what comes out of a sinful heart is what constitutes real uncleanness.

THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN (7:24-30 cf. Matthew 15:21-28)

- verse 24 - Tyre and Sidon were the main cities of Syrophenicia, located along the coast of Palestine north of Mount Carmel. This was one of Jesus' few ventures into Gentile territory.

He thought maybe He and His disciples could finally get the rest they needed so badly out here where no one knew them, but it didn't turn out that way.

- verses 25-26 - A local Gentile woman asks Him to cast a demon out of her daughter. Matthew notes that she addressed Him by His Messianic title "Son of David." Matthew also says that the disciples wanted to get rid of her, but Jesus refused.
- verses 27-28 - This exchange is widely misunderstood. Jews often insultingly referred to Gentiles as *dogs*, but that is not what Jesus is doing here. The pejorative term referred to the stray dogs that roamed the streets and were a public nuisance. Jesus uses a different term, which referred to house pets. He is making the point that, as at a family meal, the children are fed before the pets, so in God's plan, the Gospel is to go first to the Jews, and then to the Gentiles (this pattern is on display throughout the book of Acts). His illustration thus speaks, not of the relative status of Jews and Gentiles, but of the order in which God intends to communicate His Word to them.

The woman gets the point of the illustration. Rather than being insulted, she turns Jesus' illustration around, noting that sometimes the dogs get fed *during* the meal if a child gets careless and drops some food on the floor, even though the pets' feeding time has not yet arrived. Basically, she is pleading for a morsel before mealtime.
- verses 29-30 - Her great faith led Jesus to grant her request.

A DEAF MUTE HEALED (7:31-37)

- verse 31 - Jesus, still avoiding the Galilean crowds, travels around the Sea of Galilee to Decapolis.
- verse 32 - The speech impediment was what is common to most deaf people; having never heard a sound, they cannot reproduce the sounds needed for speech accurately. In addition, his tongue seems to have been attached to the bottom of his mouth, making matters worse.
- verses 33-35 - Jesus pulled the man aside, away from the crowd (probably to calm him down - how could he have known what was going to happen?). He then communicated in the only language the man could understand - sign language. Jesus indicated that He was going to heal the man's ears and tongue, and that this would be done with the power of God (the look heavenward). He then shouted the first word the man ever heard - *Ephphatha!* ("be opened" in Aramaic). The healing was complete and instantaneous.
- verses 36-37 - Jesus even commands silence in Decapolis now (contra. Mark 5:19-20). The danger is far greater now than it had been nine months earlier.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK VIII

Mark 8:1-9:1

The five incidents described in Mark 8:1-9:1 continue the narrative of Jesus' ministry in the summer of the year 32 AD. Mark omits no significant incidents covered in the other Gospels, though he describes some of them in less detail than does Matthew.

THE FEEDING OF THE FOUR THOUSAND (8:1-10 cf. Matthew 15:29-39)

- verse 1 - Still in Decapolis on Galilee's eastern shore, but with a great crowd seeking healing.
- verses 2-3 - These people had not eaten in three days (presumably Jesus had not either), and He refused to send them away lest they collapse during the journey.
- verse 4 - How quickly they forget!
- verses 5-9 - This time, four thousand plus were fed with seven loaves and a few fish; seven large baskets (better, "hampers" - cf. Acts 9:25) were filled with the leftovers.
- verse 10 - Jesus then crossed the Sea of Galilee to Dalmanutha, a region near the farthest westward point of the lake.

WARNINGS AGAINST THE PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES (8:11-21 cf. Matthew 16:1-12)

- verses 11-13 - Pharisees come to Jesus and ask for some authenticating sign, as if they hadn't had plenty of signs already. Those who refuse to see are blind to the truth that is right before their eyes. Jesus refuses to humor them, knowing that such a display as they requested would do no more than harden them further, and again sets off with His disciples across the lake.
- verses 14-15 - The yeast of the Pharisees and Herod (note that some scholars believe the term *Herodians* as used in the Gospels was a reference to the Essenes, who had received certain privileges from the Herod family and thus tended to support their rule, unlike the Pharisees or Sadducees) was their self-righteous externalism, which tends to be contagious. Even as yeast spreads slowly but surely through a batch of dough, the focus on external behavior tends to spread through a group of people. Why? For one thing, it is easier to concentrate on behavior rather than on motives and attitudes. After all, as long as I act in a "good" way, I can harbor all sorts of pride, anger, and bitterness in my heart.
- verse 16 - The disciples thought Jesus was sarcastically rebuking them for forgetting to pack a lunch.
- verses 17-21 - They still had not internalized the lessons of the miracles of the bread. Their externalism died hard - proof of the truth of what Jesus had just said. Note also that these verses refute critics who would argue that the accounts of the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand were simply different versions of the same story.

A BLIND MAN HEALED (8:22-26)

- verse 22 - Bethsaida, birthplace of Peter and Andrew, was already rejected by Jesus (Matthew 11:21), yet He shows mercy to an individual in need.
- verse 23 - Jesus used the sense of touch since that is most meaningful to a blind person.
- verse 24 - It was not unusual that the man would have trouble focusing, never having seen people or trees before.

- verse 25 - Jesus always does His work perfectly - the two-step healing may have been to elicit faith, or perhaps to give the man a greater appreciation for the transformation that was occurring.
- verse 26 - Again, the command for silence to avoid miracle-seeking crowds, especially in the context of a village that had already demonstrated its hard-heartedness.

PETER'S CONFESSION OF FAITH (8:27-30 cf. Matthew 16:13-20; Luke 9:18-21)

- v.27 - This is the farthest Jesus ever traveled away from home. Caesarea Philippi was a town at the foot of Mount Hermon (the highest mountain in Palestine), constructed by Philip in honor of Tiberius Caesar. It was a pagan town, full of idolatry (including a temple to Tiberius himself - emperor worship was still in its infancy), and set the northernmost boundary of Palestine. Jesus puts a question to His disciples concerning the people's response to His message.
- verse 28 - The people, by and large, did not realize that Jesus was the Messiah. The ones who did had such a terrible misconception of what that involved that they could be disregarded as far as real understanding was concerned. Notice that the disciples only listed the *good* answers - they didn't bother to mention that the Pharisees thought He was Beelzebub!
- verse 29 - Jesus expected the disciples to understand Him better, and they did. Peter, speaking for the rest, identified Jesus as the Messiah. Matthew records this conversation more extensively.
- verse 30 - He still insisted on secrecy, knowing that the multitude would misunderstand and the Pharisees would step up their efforts to get rid of Him.

JESUS SPEAKS PLAINLY OF HIS DEATH (8:31-9:1 cf. Matthew 16:21-28; Luke 9:22-27)

- 8:31 - The disciples really didn't understand Jesus' Messiahship either. He had to prepare them gradually for the shock of His execution. He also spoke of His resurrection, but none of this really seemed to sink in.
- 8:32 - Peter, good friend that he was, tried to cheer Jesus up and turn His mind away from such pessimistic thoughts.
- 8:33 - Satan had tempted Jesus with the same thing in the wilderness - gain the Kingdom while bypassing the Cross. Peter here was failing to speak with divinely-given insight, contrary to his earlier confession of Jesus' messiahship; he was looking at things purely from a human perspective.
- 8:34 - Following Christ means death; note that this is not a reference to burdens or trials, as the people of Jesus' day would have readily understood. Total self-denial is the price for entering the Kingdom of God.
- 8:35-37 - Submission over possession, spiritual over material, eternal over temporal - these are the values of the Kingdom.
- 8:38 - The books won't be balanced until the Second Coming.
- 9:1 - He speaks here not of the Second Coming, but of the foretaste of His glory witnessed by three of them on the Mount of Transfiguration. Note that this verse is used to argue a variety of positions from amillennialism to the assertion that Jesus was obviously sadly mistaken about the coming of God's Kingdom.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK IX

Mark 9:2-50

The five incidents described in Mark 9:2-50 conclude the narrative of Jesus' ministry in the summer of the year 32 AD. Mark omits a number of incidents covered in the other Synoptic Gospels, including the story of the coin found in the fish's mouth (Matthew 17:24-27), Jesus' discourse on discipline in the church (Matthew 18:15-20), the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35), Jesus' rejection in a Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-56), and Jesus' teaching on discipleship (Luke 9:57-62).

THE TRANSFIGURATION (9:2-13 cf. Matthew 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36)

- verses 2-3 - Less than a week after Peter's confession, the three disciples who comprised the inner circle (Peter, James, and John) are taken by Jesus onto a high mountain (the traditional site is Mount Tabor, but Mount Hermon is probably a better choice, since they were already in Caesarea Philippi). Here Jesus was transfigured (literally *metamorphosed*), and for the only time in His earthly existence something of His divine glory became visible. Matthew says He shone like the sun; Mark says His clothes were whiter than any bleach could make them.
- verse 4 - Moses and Elijah then appeared, representing the Law and the Prophets, both fulfilled in the work Christ was about to do (note that neither of these men was buried by men when they died). Luke notes that their conversation dealt with Jesus' impending death ("departure" is literally *exodus*, interesting in the light of the presence of Moses), and that the disciples had fallen asleep.
- verses 5-6 - Peter's suggestion upon waking up may seem to be a strange one. Both Mark and Luke remark that Peter spoke out of confusion, and perhaps it is best to leave it at that. Commentators have also suggested that he was trying to perpetuate the glory rather than returning to the world, or that he thought the Kingdom had arrived and was trying to fulfill Zechariah 14:16.
- verse 7 - At any rate, a cloud passed over them (cf. Old Testament *shekinah*, the glory of God as it appeared over the Tabernacle in the wilderness), and again God again asserted the deity of the Messiah. (Some have suggested that God was saying, "Be quiet and listen, Peter!")
- verse 8 - The disciples responded with great fear (only the high priest could enter the *shekinah*, and that only once a year; for anyone else to do so meant instant death). But the work of Christ gives all believers access to God's presence; when they looked up, Moses and Elijah were gone.
- verses 9-10 - Jesus again commands silence, this time indicating that there will be a time for publicity - after the Resurrection. Mark notes that the disciples didn't know what Jesus was talking about when He spoke of the Resurrection.
- verse 11 - Having seen Elijah, they wonder what part he plays in the coming of the Kingdom (cf. Malachi 4:5-6).
- verses 12-13 - Jesus points out that this prophecy refers to one who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" - John the Baptist.

DEMON CAST OUT OF A BOY (9:14-29 cf. Matthew 17:14-21; Luke 9:37-43)

- verses 14-16 - When Jesus returned from Mount Hermon, He was met by the rest of His disciples, who were being questioned by some scribes (persistent, weren't they?), and a large crowd.
- verses 17-18 - The boy was demon-possessed, and the demon had produced insanity, possibly epilepsy, and had also brought on numerous suicide attempts. The disciples had been unable to cast the demon out.
- verse 19 - Jesus is disturbed by the lack of faith in His disciples.
- verses 20-22 - The demon immediately produces an attack; he wanted to get his last licks in.
- verses 23-24 - Jesus again emphasizes the importance of faith; the father's attitude should be our own, knowing that our faith is always in need of strengthening.
- verses 25-27 - Jesus worked a complete and permanent cure, though the demon tried hard to foil Him.
- verses 28-29 - Battle with evil spiritual forces is not easy; it requires labor as well as faith.

JESUS AGAIN SPEAKS OF HIS DEATH (9:30-32 cf. Matthew 17:22-23; Luke 9:43-45)

Jesus now travels down through Galilee as secretly as possible, making His way toward Jerusalem. He again speaks of His death and Resurrection; the disciples don't understand what He is talking about, but are afraid to ask.

THE EXAMPLE OF A CHILD (9:33-37 cf. Matthew 18:1-14; Luke 9:46-48)

- verses 33-34 - The disciples were arguing about which one would hold the highest position in the Kingdom.
- verse 35 - Humility and service are avenues to greatness in the Kingdom.
- verses 36-37 - Kindness to the lowly is a Christian virtue, while harshness to those in humble places is an abomination. A Christian is known by how he treats those *beneath* him. Jesus also points out that kindness to the lowly is directed toward God Himself.

LESSONS ON MERCY (9:38-41 cf. Luke 9:49-56)

- verses 38-39 - How often do we condemn other Christians because they don't do things in exactly the same way we do? Jesus rebukes John for looking at the surface and ignoring the man's motives.
- verse 40 - This does not imply that one who is neutral toward the Gospel is approved by God. There is no such thing as neutrality; one is either for Christ or against Him.
- verse 41 - Jesus again emphasizes the importance of small deeds of charity done in God's name.

CAUSING OTHERS TO SIN (9:42-50 cf. Matthew 18:8-10)

- verse 42 - It is a serious matter indeed to lead someone else into sin, particularly one who is weak and impressionable.

- verses 43-48 - It is also important to deal with sin in your own life. Even things that are good can be sources of temptation or sin. We must be willing to excise even good things from our lives if they are leading us away from Christ and His service. These verses are not intended to be taken literally, of course, despite the bizarre actions of some religious ascetics over the years.

The word translated “hell” in this passage is *Gehenna*, a Greek transliteration of a Hebrew phrase meaning *Valley of Hinnom*. The Valley of Hinnom was one of the valleys that surrounded the mountain on which the city of Jerusalem was built. Solomon had built idol temples here for his pagan wives, and later Israelites began to worship at these temples. Josiah destroyed them and turned the Valley of Hinnom into the city dump. By the first century, it was a perpetually smoldering pile of refuse and unwanted corpses. The “worm” is thus a reference to maggots feeding off the dead bodies, while the fire is the constantly burning trash disposal mechanism. Basically Jesus is saying here, “If you want a little bit of an idea of what hell is like, look at the Valley of Hinnom.” Like the descriptions of heaven in Revelation 21-22, the symbolic language used, horrible/beautiful though it may be, cannot come close to describing a reality completely beyond human experience.

- verses 49-50 - Salt in the first century was used as a preservative. The “fire” of verse 49 could be a reference to the Holy Spirit, who preserves those who belong to Christ. In verse 50, Jesus shifts the image to talk about the way Christians are to serve as preservatives in the world (the distinctness required for witness) and in the lives of one another.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK X

Mark 10

The five incidents described in Mark 10 take place in the late spring of 33 AD - in the month or two prior to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Mark has thus omitted between thirty and thirty-five incidents from the fall of 32 AD and the early spring of the following year that are recorded by the other Gospel writers; for some reason, he has left out about six months of Jesus' public ministry. By the time Mark rejoins the narrative, Jesus has finished His work in Galilee and has traveled down into Judea. He is on the way to His death. He does spend a short time on the east side of the Jordan River in a region called Perea, however, which is where the first incident in Mark 10 occurs.

JESUS AND DIVORCE (10:1-12 cf. Matthew 19:1-12)

- verse 1 - Jesus here journeys to the Perea side of the Jordan Valley, where He teaches the multitudes who gather.
- verses 2-4 - In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, the Old Testament law permitted divorce. The Pharisees here were trying to get Him embroiled in a theological argument, seeing if He would side with the conservative school of the rabbi Shammai (who taught that the *uncleanness* of Deuteronomy 24 only referred to adultery), or the liberal school of Hillel (who taught that it could mean almost anything that displeased the husband).
- verses 5-9 - Jesus says that the Old Testament law was a concession to the sinfulness of the human heart. God chose to regulate divorce rather than forbidding it altogether. Jesus indicates that marriage is intended to be permanent; it is not a social institution, but something ordained by God.
- verses 10-12 - The solemn nature of the marital relationship suddenly dawns on the disciples. Jesus explains that any divorce except for fornication causes adultery, also implying that one for fornication does not, i.e., remarriage is permissible (note that Mark does not record the exceptive clause concerning adultery found in Matthew's account).

JESUS BLESSES CHILDREN (10:13-16 cf. Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17)

Here we find small children brought to Jesus for His blessing. The disciples try to send them away, but Jesus uses them as an object lesson about the nature of genuine faith. How may children illustrate this truth? Note that this passage is often used by paedobaptists to support their position, but the issues in question are not really the same.

THE RICH YOUNG RULER (10:17-31 cf. Matthew 19:16-30; Luke 18:18-30)

- verse 17 - A man said by Luke to be a "ruler" (most likely an upper-class Jew) approaches Jesus with almost obsequious politeness. He carries with him the basic misconception that eternal life is to be earned.
- verse 18 - Jesus refuses to accept the polite address, noting that nothing short of acknowledging His deity would be meaningful.
- verses 19-20 - Jesus cites the commandments dealing with man's relationship to man. The young man claims to be blameless in this regard - quite a claim, though showing a weak view

of sin (contra. Jesus' explanations in Matthew 5:21-48). The young man was obviously moral.

- verses 21-22 - Jesus, as always, meets him at the point of his need; he was violating the First Commandment by putting his possessions before God. This does not mean that everyone should give away all of his possessions (the conclusion drawn by pioneer anchorite Anthony of Thebes near the end of the third century and adopted by many monks thereafter); simply that nothing in our lives should take priority over God (Matthew 5:29-30). The young man was not willing to make this total commitment.
- verses 23-24 - A self-sufficient man finds it very difficult to place his trust in Christ; it is also hard for one who is rich (or powerful or intelligent) to avoid becoming self-sufficient.
- verses 25-27 - This enigmatic statement is a simple case of hyperbole. Some have suggested that Jesus is referring to a small door in one of the gates of Jerusalem called "The Eye of the Needle" that caravans arriving at night could use to enter the city. In order for a camel to enter, he needed to unload his burden and crawl through on his knees. While it's a nice picture, it doesn't work for two reasons. First of all, no such gate existed in Jerusalem until the Middle Ages. Secondly, Jesus' whole point is not that what He is describing is *difficult*, but that it is *impossible*. The disciples' question and Jesus' response make this obvious.
- verses 28-31 - Jesus notes that all sacrifices will be richly repaid, both in this world and the next, but not without persecutions. How is this possible? Note that the repayment is in the spiritual coin of the Kingdom, not in material goods (e.g., siblings who turn against a Christian are replaced by many more brothers and sisters in Christ). Matthew 19:28 includes the fact that the apostles will judge the twelve tribes of Israel in the Kingdom.

JESUS AGAIN PREDICTS HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION (10:32-45 cf. Matthew 20:17-28; Luke 18:31-34)

- verses 32-34 - Jesus is still trying to prepare His disciples for what will soon happen.
- verses 35-37 - What Jesus said is not understood; James and John still expect an immediate political kingdom and want to be Prime Minister and Secretary of State.
- verses 38-40 - They say they are ready to go with Jesus through anything. Both wound up suffering much (James was executed in Acts 12 and John eventually was exiled to the island of Patmos), but places of honor are given, not by request, but according to the Father's will.
- verse 41 - The other disciples were upset, to say the least.
- verses 42-45 - Another paradox; greatness in the Kingdom is measured by service to others, with Christ as the supreme example.

BLIND MEN HEALED IN JERICHO (10:46-52 cf. Matthew 20:29-34; Luke 18:35-43)

- verse 46 - Jericho was an ancient city located not far west of the Jordan, a beautiful oasis in what was otherwise a barren wilderness. Jesus was with a great crowd. Bartimaeus, a blind man, was begging beside the road.
- verses 47-48 - When he heard that Jesus was near, he bawled out in his loudest, most obnoxious alms-gathering voice (Matthew notes that there were two blind men; Bartimaeus was obviously the more vocal of the two).
- verses 49-52 - Jesus calls him and heals him according to his faith. He was not reluctant to ask the Lord for something big because he understood something of the power of God.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK XI

Mark 11

Mark, like the other Gospel writers, devotes the largest proportion of his Gospel to the events surrounding the death and Resurrection of Jesus. The four incidents described in Mark 11 take place in the final week of Jesus' earthly life. According to the chronology that we have been following, these events occur on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, March 29-31, 33 AD. The only incident omitted by Mark here is the conversation Jesus has with a group of Greeks in the Temple area on Monday (John 12:20-50).

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY (11:1-11 cf. Matthew 21:1-17; Luke 19:29-44; John 12:12-19)

- verse 1 - It is now the time for Jesus to embrace the death for which He had come into the world. The time for silence and secrecy is over, and He now prepares to announce publicly His identity as the promised Messiah. As Jesus and His disciples approach Jerusalem, they pass near Bethany and Bethphage, two villages at the foot of the Mount of Olives.
- verses 2-3 - Jesus instructs two of the disciples to fetch a donkey from one of the villages.
- verses 4-6 - They found the donkey, just as Jesus had said they would, and responded to those who questioned them as Jesus had instructed. Note that, while the willingness of the people in the village to let the disciples have the donkey *could* have been miraculous, it need not have been so; Jesus might very well have made prior arrangements with the owner to borrow the animal.
- verses 7-10 - When Jesus entered Jerusalem in this way, He was fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. The people responded by crying out the words of Psalm 118:25-26. They were indeed acknowledging Him as the Messiah, but their enthusiasm was short-lived.
- verse 11 - Jesus entered the Temple, but did nothing because it was late in the day. He then returned to Bethany, probably spending the night at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

CURSING THE FIG TREE (11:12-14, 20-26 cf. Matthew 21:18-22)

- verses 12-14 - On the way from Bethany to Jerusalem, Jesus saw a fig tree with leaves (a sure sign of fruit, since fig trees produce leaves only after the fruit has appeared). Jesus then cursed the tree, essentially as a symbol of hypocrisy.
- verses 20-21 - The next day, passing the same spot, they saw that the tree had shriveled up.
- verses 22-26 - Jesus uses it to teach a lesson about faith, going on to note that a prayer of faith requires that one have a right standing with God and man.

THE TEMPLE CLEANSED AGAIN (11:15-18 cf. Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-48)

Very similar to what happened at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry; Jesus again asserts His authority over the place of worship and drives out those who would desecrate it through commercial enterprise. The Sanhedrin couldn't get a chance to arrest Him secretly because of the positive response of the people.

JESUS' AUTHORITY CHALLENGED (11:27-33 cf. Matthew 21:23-27; Luke 20:1-8)

- verses 27-28 - Early Tuesday morning, the religious leaders find Jesus in the Temple and try to put Him on the spot. The question is designed to get Him either to deny His own authority or to commit what they would consider blasphemy by claiming that His authority came from God.
- verses 29-33 - He turned the tables on them, showing the insincerity of their question at the same time; as with John, they wouldn't have believed Him no matter what the source of His authority. They recognize the trap He has laid for them and refuse to answer, and Jesus in turn refuses to answer them. It is worth noting here that those who reject Jesus generally do not do so on the basis of sound reasoning. The "reasons" they give are nothing more than phony excuses designed to bolster and rationalize their own unbelief.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK XII

Mark 12

The three incidents described in Mark 12 all take place in one day - Tuesday, March 31, 33 AD. Mark omits the parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14) and Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees (Matthew 23).

THE PARABLE OF THE WICKED TENANTS (12:1-12 cf. Matthew 21:33-46; Luke 20:9-19)

- verse 1 - It was not unusual for a wealthy man to hire others to manage his farm.
- verses 2-5 - The reference here is to the mistreatment of the Old Testament prophets.
- verses 6-8 - This, of course, is the crucifixion of Jesus.
- verse 9 - A prediction of the transfer of God's focus from the Jews to the Gentiles.
- verses 10-11 - From Psalm 118:22-23 (the same psalm from which the crowd quoted on Palm Sunday).
- verse 12 - They become more and more determined in their opposition, but were fearful of Jesus' popularity with the crowds.

INSINCERE QUESTIONS (12:13-40 cf. Matthew 22:15-46; Luke 20:20-47)

The religious leaders know they have to get rid of Jesus, and they set out to gather evidence against Him. Various groups approach Him with questions designed to trap Him or make Him look foolish.

THE HERODIANS - THE POLITICAL TRAP (verses 13-17)

- verses 13-14 - The Herodians (possibly another name for the Essenes) supported the dubious monarchy of the Herod family. The Pharisees use them to try to set Jesus up, beginning with flowery flattery.
- verse 15 - A setup. If He said the obnoxious poll tax should be paid, the Jews would consider Him a traitor; if not, He could be reported to the Romans for fomenting insurrection.
- verses 15-16 - Jesus sees what they are doing and notes that a denarius is imprinted with the image of Tiberius.
- verse 17 - If what bears Caesar's image belongs to Caesar, what bears God's image - man himself - belongs to God. This shut them up quickly.

THE SADDUCEES - THE THEOLOGICAL TRAP (verses 18-27)

- verses 18-23 - The Sadducees, Hellenizers and theological liberals, sought to make Jesus look foolish by a hypothetical *reductio ad absurdum* of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Note that the woman married the whole succession of brothers because of the law of levirate marriage, by which, if a man dies childless, his widow is to be married by the next of kin, who is to raise up offspring for his dead brother.
- verses 24-27 - Jesus responds by showing their misunderstanding of both Scripture and the eternal state. Note that His use of the Old Testament implies verbal inerrancy, since His

argument hangs on a verb tense. These verses can also be used against the Mormon teaching of eternal marriage and child-bearing after death. We should also note that, when Jesus says there will be no marriage in heaven, this does not imply that those we love on earth will be less dear to us, but that our relationships with others in the body of Christ will be far beyond even the most intimate of relationships that exist on earth. We will thus love our spouses more, not less.

THE PHARISEES - THE LEGAL TRAP (verses 28-34)

- verse 28 - The Pharisees, great scholars of the law, here put to Jesus a question the rabbis had argued about for years - which of the 613 commandments in the Torah was the greatest?
- verses 29-34 - Jesus summarizes the law in terms of love for God and man (the same answer given earlier in the context of the parable of the Good Samaritan). Mark notes that the lawyer who asked the question was impressed, and Jesus tells him he is not far from the kingdom.

JESUS - THE DEITY OF THE MESSIAH (verses 35-40)

- verse 35 - The religious leaders may be done with Jesus, but He is not finished with them. Jesus now asks them a question concerning the identity of the Messiah.
- verses 36-37 - He then shows them that the Messiah is not only the Son of David, but also the Son of God.
- verses 38-40 - Mark briefly summarizes Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, which is given in much more detailed form in Matthew 23. One can easily imagine how this increased their determination to do whatever was necessary to get rid of the man who had become a major threat to their standing among the people.

THE WIDOW'S MITE (12:41-44 cf. Luke 21:1-4)

Jesus here sees a poor widow in the treasury (located in the Court of Women in the Temple), casting two lepta into one of the boxes (a lepton was the smallest coin minted in the Empire, a piece of copper worth about 1/100 of a denarius). Jesus commends her for giving everything, while those who gave ostentatious offerings often stole from the poor with the other hand while giving what cost them nothing.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK XIII

Mark 13

Mark 13 contains Mark's record of the Olivet Discourse, which also occurred on Tuesday, March 31, 33 AD. The sermon is also found in Matthew 24 and Luke 21:5-36. Mark omits the parables found in Matthew 25.

The Olivet Discourse is difficult to handle because it combines prophecies of the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD) and the Second Coming, which are often difficult to sort out. Not all agree on how they *should* be sorted out, of course. While some clearly refer to the fall of Jerusalem and others clearly speak of the Second Coming of Christ (except to extreme preterists), there is considerable dispute about the middle section of the sermon and the events to which it refers.

INTRODUCTION (13:1-4)

- verses 1-2 - The Temple built (actually remodeled) by Herod the Great, a gorgeous edifice, was to be demolished only six years after its completion in 64 AD, having taken over eighty years to complete.
- verses 3-4 - The disciples ask about the destruction of Jerusalem (and, in Matthew, the Second Coming, apparently assuming the two would be simultaneous). The fact that they were not is one of the things that makes Jesus' answer difficult to interpret. It is not unusual, though, for biblical prophecy to address events widely separated in time in the same passage (e.g., Isaiah 61).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LAST DAYS (13:5-13)

- verses 5-8 - When the New Testament speaks about the last days, it does not mean the years immediately preceding the Second Coming, but instead refers to the entire period of time between Christ's first and second advents (if this were not the case, the New Testament writers could hardly have spoken of themselves as being in the last days). This inter-advent period is to be characterized by false messiahs and political and social turmoil. Thus those who would attempt to whip up enthusiasm for the coming of Christ in the near future by tallying up statistics about wars or famines miss the point; these things characterize the entire era between the advents of the Messiah. They are not intended to help people predict when the Second Coming will occur.
- verses 9-13 - Inside the Church there will be persecution, apostasy, false teaching, and indifference. Perseverance will mark the saints, and the Gospel will be spread despite (or perhaps because of) these things. Note that verse 11 is not intended to be a manual for sermon preparation!

THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST (13:14-27)

- verse 14 - "The abomination that causes desolation" refers to the desecration of the Holy of Holies (cf. Daniel 9:27). The sanctuary had been desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BC, sparking the Maccabean revolt. Most commentators understand this as a reference to the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD, though

dispensationalists believe it speaks of the handiwork of the Antichrist during the Tribulation. Here's where things start to get very uncertain.

- verses 15-18 - What is described is clearly a time of great persecution for those who follow Christ. In fact, Christians who lived in Jerusalem and vicinity in 70 AD fled the city when the Roman Tenth Legion invaded, citing this verse as justification for doing so rather than remaining and defending the city (this flight of Christians prior to the climactic battle drove a deep wedge between Christians and Jews at the time, generating an animosity that contributed greatly to the Church becoming largely Gentile in its makeup by the end of the first century).
- verses 19-20 - These verses make it hard to apply the preceding sentences to 70 AD, however, unless we take them as a piece of hyperbole on the part of our Lord. It is because of these verses, and some of the descriptions that follow, that I would lean toward applying this section of the chapter to the Second Coming rather than the destruction of Jerusalem.
- verses 21-27 - False messiahs will proliferate as Christ's coming approaches, but the Second Advent will be obvious to all. Jesus uses apocalyptic language from Isaiah 13:10; 34:4 to describe the divine judgment that will accompany His return.

THE LESSON OF THE FIG TREE (13:28-31)

- verses 28-29 - As sprouting foliage is a sign of spring, so the events described above are an indicator that "it is near." What "it" happens to be is the big question, of course. If the reference is to the destruction of Jerusalem, it would seem to be out of place immediately following verses describing the Second Advent. On the other hand, if "it" is the Second Coming, these verses would seem to encourage end-of-the-world speculations. The admixture of references in the sermon make it very difficult to be dogmatic about these things, though this hasn't stopped many on all sides of the issue from doing so over the years.
- verses 30-31 - The reference to "this generation" is also problematic depending on the event to which one ties these verses. The most straightforward interpretation would obviously be that Jesus was indicating that the "generation" to whom He was speaking would have some representatives still living when Jerusalem fell. If the reference is to the Second Coming, obviously things become more difficult. Some have suggested that Jesus is saying that the generation that witnesses the beginning of these eschatological events will also witness their end (i.e., once things start happening, the end will come quickly), or that the word translated "generation" should more appropriately be translated "race," so that Jesus is indicating the existence of the Jewish nation until the end of time (both of these are common dispensational interpretations).

HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE? (13:32-37)

- verse 32 - This verse alone should discourage eschatological speculations about the time of the Second Coming, though it obviously has not completely done so. Despite the clear warning here, date-setters have insisted that, while one may not know the day or the hour, it is still possible to know the month and the year!
- verses 33-37 - The admonition is to watch. By watching, Jesus is not advocating selling all one's possessions and standing on a mountaintop in white "ascension robes," as did the nineteenth-century Millerites (predecessors of the Seventh-Day Adventists). Instead,

watching involves being engaged in the Master's work, just like a faithful steward who doesn't want the owner of the estate to come home unexpectedly and find him goofing off. Thus the admonition is to faithful obedience, not to obsession with the eschaton.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK XIV

Mark 14

The Gospels tell us nothing about what Jesus and His disciples did on the Wednesday before His death. Mark 14 contains Mark's record of the events of Thursday, April 2, 33 AD, though he begins with another flashback to an event that had taken place almost a week before. The lengthy discourses contained in John 13-17 are not found in any of the Synoptics.

PLOTS AGAINST JESUS (14:1-2, 10-11 cf. Matthew 26:1-5, 14-16; Luke 22:1-6)

- verses 1-2 - The Passover feast began on Thursday in this particular year. The Sanhedrin plots to arrest Him secretly, but they want to wait until after the Feast of Unleavened Bread (on the first day of Passover; it ended at sundown Thursday).
- verses 10-11 - Judas offers to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (worth 4 denarii each - a total of about five months' wages); the Sanhedrin agrees, and pays him on the spot. Why? Luke ascribes it to Satan. Was it greed? We know Judas was a thief. A desire to force Jesus' hand, thus bringing in the Kingdom? Purely speculative.

ANOINTING AT BETHANY (14:3-9 cf. Matthew 26:6-13; John 11:55-12:11)

- verse 3 - This would have occurred on Saturday, March 28, 33 AD according to the dating scheme we've been following in this course (see John 12:1; Mark is, for the second time in his Gospel, using a flashback). The dinner took place at the home of Simon (formerly) the leper. Lazarus was present, and Martha, always the hostess, was helping serve the meal. Mary (this was Mary of Bethany, Martha's sister) here used 12 ounces (a Roman pound) of pure nard, an expensive perfumed oil, to anoint Jesus' head and feet (see John's account). This was quite an extravagant display of love.
- verses 4-5 - Judas, the treasurer of the group and a thief at that, suggests that the perfume, worth a year's salary, would better have been sold and the money given to the poor (after Judas had taken his cut, of course). He apparently was not the only one shocked at Mary's extravagance.
- verses 6-9 - But Jesus praises Mary and says that this is symbolic of His coming burial, for which perfumes were often used. Indeed, this deed of kindness is one of the things for which Mary of Bethany continues to be remembered almost two thousand years later.

THE LAST SUPPER (14:12-26 cf. Matthew 26:17-29; Luke 22:7-38; John 13-14)

- verse 12 - The one who is the Lamb of God in fact prepares the symbol that points toward Him. On Thursday afternoon, Jesus prepares to celebrate the Passover meal with His disciples.
- verse 13-16 - Why the cloak and dagger routine? Jesus was in mortal danger if He set foot in Jerusalem, so He sends His disciples, following prearranged plans (a man carrying water was an oddity), probably at the home of John Mark's mother (we know this was a gathering place for the Early Church in Jerusalem, and could well have been the "upper room" where Jesus' followers were gathered on the Day of Pentecost). This would allow Jesus to wait and enter the city at night.

- verses 17-26 - This was the *Seder*, commemorating the Exodus from Egypt. Jesus indicates that this is His last. Note that Seder reenactments today often incorporate elements that were not introduced into the feast until after the time of Jesus. They may have interesting parallels, but they have little to do with what Jesus and His disciples did the night before His death. The following is a summary of the Seder as it was celebrated in the first century.

THE ORDER OF THE PASSOVER MEAL

1. A blessing was said, after which a communal cup of wine was passed around the table and partaken of by all. This cup represented the deliverance from Egypt (Luke 22:17-18 cf. Exodus 6:6-7)
2. The food was then brought out - roasted lamb, *matzoh* (unleavened bread representing haste), bitter herbs (horseradish - the bitterness of bondage), applesauce (mortar for bricks made by the Israelites in Egypt).
3. Retelling of the Exodus story.
4. Sing the first part of the *Hallel* (Psalm 113-115).
5. The second cup of wine - the cup of bondage - was passed around.
6. The matzoh was distributed, often dipped in horseradish. At this point, Judas left (Luke 22:19; John 13:26-30).
7. Eating the meal - here Jesus compared the matzoh to His body.
8. The third cup of wine - the cup of redemption - was passed around. Jesus compared this to His blood (Luke 22:20).
9. Sing the remainder of the *Hallel* (Psalm 116-118); at this point Jesus and the disciples left for the Mount of Olives (Mark 14:26).
10. The fourth cup of wine - the cup of communion - was normally passed around at this time, but Jesus said He would not drink with them again until they would drink together in the kingdom of God. Communion is not possible until after the Cross.

PRAYING IN GETHSEMANE (14:27-42 cf. Matthew 26:30-46; Luke 22:39-46)

- verse 27 - Jesus and His disciples head for the Garden of Gethsemane on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. On the way, He informs them that they will all soon flee.
- verse 28 - This probably refers to His appearance to 500 of His followers at once (cf. I Corinthians 15:6).
- verse 29-31 - Jesus knows Peter better than Peter knows himself. Note that *all* of the disciples spoke the same way.
- verses 32-34 - Jesus leaves eight of the disciples and goes off with Peter, James, and John, then asks them to pray while He moves farther into the garden alone to talk to His Father.
- verses 35-36 - Jesus abhorred the thought of death, but was willing to go through with it for His people.
- verses 37-42 - Three seasons of prayer, three times He finds His disciples asleep; the “posse” is now on the way.

JESUS BETRAYED AND ARRESTED (14:43-52 cf. Matthew 26:47-56; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:1-12)

- verse 43 - Having arranged with Judas to arrest Jesus under cover of darkness when the multitudes would not be present, the Sanhedrin gathered a mob to do the deed (note that the soldiers would have been Temple guards, not Roman troops).
- verses 44-45 - The kiss of betrayal by Judas was needed because in the dark, they couldn't tell which one was Jesus.
- verses 46-47 - The mob seized Jesus, and Peter pulled his sword and cut off Malchus' ear (we know from the other accounts that Jesus rebuked Peter for using his sword under such circumstances, then healed the servant's ear).
- verses 48-50 - He rebukes the Sanhedrin for being too cowardly to arrest Him in broad daylight, but notes that all this was necessary in order to fulfill the Scriptures. The disciples then run away.
- verses 51-52 - Mark tells of a young man who was watching in nothing but a nightshirt and "barely" escaped capture. Could this have been Mark himself? Quite possibly, especially if the Last Supper was held in his mother's house. Who else would have known about this?

TRIAL BEFORE CAIAPHAS (14:53-65 cf. Matthew 26:57-68; Luke 22:63-65; John 18:24)

- verse 53 - Jesus had first been taken to see Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest and evidently still the power behind the throne. Jesus refused to speak in this informal tribunal. He was then taken to Caiaphas' palace, where some of the members of the Sanhedrin had been hastily gathered.
- verse 54 - Peter tags along, waiting outside with the servants.
- verses 55-59 - The planted witnesses contradicted one another, even when they tried to give a sinister slant to an actual quotation from Jesus' lips. Legally speaking, Jesus' trial was a farce. The whole Sanhedrin had to be present for the death sentence to be passed. The vote was not allowed to be unanimous, since that would indicate slanted evidence and a lack of mercy.
- verses 60-61 - Jesus still said nothing.
- verse 62 - He finally affirms that He is the Messiah.
- verses 63-64 - Jesus is immediately condemned (again illegal - somewhat like our Fifth Amendment, a person could not provide testimony against himself).
- verse 65 - More abuse, both physical and verbal, from both the members of the Sanhedrin and their servants.

PETER'S DENIAL (14:66-72 cf. Matthew 26:69-75; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27)

- verses 66-68 - Peter waited in the courtyard by an open fire. John notes that "another disciple" (surely John himself) was also there and had arranged for Peter to get in. One of the high priest's servants recognizes Peter, but he lies to her.
- verse 69 - Later, on the porch, Peter again lies about knowing Jesus.
- verses 70-71 - He is again accused, this time because of his Galilean accent. John adds that the accuser was related to Malchus and had seen Peter in Gethsemane. Peter then issued a profane third denial.

- verse 72 - The rooster crowed, Peter remembered Jesus' words, and he broke down and cried. Luke tells us that Jesus, while being led away, turned to look at Peter at precisely this time. Christ's look of reproof was enough to drive Peter to bitter repentance.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK XV

Mark 15:1-16:8

Mark 15 contains Mark's record of the events of Friday, April 3, 33 AD, while the early verses of Mark 16 take place on Resurrection Sunday, April 5.

TRIAL BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN (15:1 cf. Matthew 27:1; Luke 22:66-71)

At daybreak, the full Sanhedrin assembled. They merely affixed a rubber stamp to what had been done during the night and sent Jesus away to Pilate. The Sanhedrin had been deprived of the power of capital punishment several decades earlier, so they needed a conviction from Pilate if they were to get rid of Jesus.

FIRST TRIAL BEFORE PILATE (15:1-5 cf. Matthew 27:2, 11-14; Luke 23:1-5; John 18:28-38)

- verses 1-3 - The nature of the accusation is given by Luke - perverting the nation, forbidding to pay taxes, saying He was a king (notice that the charge of blasphemy is never even mentioned).
- verses 4-5 - Pilate didn't like the Jews anyway and hoped to avoid the whole explosive mess. But the Sanhedrin couldn't condemn anyone to death, and they wanted Jesus executed. Pilate, the cynic, is impressed by Jesus and wants to release Him. Luke notes that as soon as the priests mention Galilee, Pilate sees a way out and ships Jesus off to Herod Antipas, who was in Jerusalem at the time for the Passover festival. Before long, however, Herod shipped Him right back to Pilate.

SECOND TRIAL BEFORE PILATE (15: 6-19 cf. Matthew 27:15-30; Luke 23: 13-25; John 18:39-19:16)

- verse 6 - Usually a political prisoner would be released rather than a criminal.
- verses 7-8 - Barabbas was an insurrectionist, probably a Zealot, and thus popular with the common people; their choice was not as ridiculous as it sounds.
- verses 9-10 - Pilate tried to get them to release Jesus because he knew they didn't have just cause to prosecute Him. Pilate wanted to beat Him and release Him.
- verses 11-14 - The crowd (the same ones who had been cheering along the road a week earlier?), stirred up by the Sanhedrin, called for Jesus to be crucified.
- verse 15 - Pilate tried to wash his hands of the matter, but the blood could not be removed so easily. Tradition says he committed suicide years later (though historical records of the Roman Empire record nothing of him beyond his years in Judea). The people readily accepted blame and have borne God's judgment ever since (see Romans 11). Note that this does *not* justify the anti-Semitism that has been all too pervasive throughout the history of the Church. Scourging or flogging involved a brutal beating with leather thongs with pieces of metal and glass imbedded in them. Each stroke would tear the skin off the person's back (see the graphic depiction of this in *The Passion of the Christ*); many died from scourging, thus the limit of thirty-nine lashes. Crucifixion victims were scourged first to break down their strength so they would die faster on the cross - the Romans had the perverted idea that this was an act of mercy.

John 19:9-13 notes further conversation between Pilate and Jesus, the threat by the Sanhedrin that finally pushed Pilate over the brink (they reported him anyway, and he was recalled shortly afterward), and the site of the trial - the Antonia fortress at the corner of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

There is another interesting story associated with the stairway on which Jesus stood while He was being tried by Pilate. According to Catholic tradition, Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine, visited Jerusalem in the fourth century and found the staircase on which Jesus had stood (remember, Jerusalem had been completely destroyed by the Roman army in 70 AD); she knew it was the right staircase because Jesus' footprints were miraculously imprinted in the stone. Following her discovery, the staircase was supposedly transported to Rome by angels, where it remains today. Known as the *Santa Scala*, pilgrims to the city crawl up the stone stairs on their knees, saying a prayer on every step, and hoping thereby to have their sins forgiven. Early in his life, Martin Luther visited Rome and climbed the stairs. About halfway up, he realized how ridiculous the whole thing was and got up and walked down again. A few years later, he started the Protestant Reformation.

- verses 16-20 - In the Praetorium, Jesus was mocked and beaten by the soldiers - Roman ones this time.

THE CRUCIFIXION (15:21-41 cf. Matthew 27:31-56; Luke 23:26-49; John 19:16-30)

- verse 21 - On the way to the place of crucifixion, Jesus struggled to carry His cross, and the guards forced Simon of Cyrene (in present-day Libya in North Africa) to carry it for Him. The fact that Mark mentions the name of Simon's sons strongly suggests that they had become Christians and were known to Mark's readers.
- verses 22-24 - The place of crucifixion was a small hill just outside the wall of the city (there are two competing sites in Jerusalem today). Jesus was offered a general anaesthetic (a pain-killing drug), which He refused. Luke notes that many women were following the procession weeping, but Jesus told them to weep for themselves because of the judgment that would come. The Roman soldiers gambled for Jesus' clothing.
- verses 25-32 - Jesus was crucified at 9:00 in the morning. The charge against Him was on a sign over His head (common practice to deter others from committing the same crime, whatever it may be) - that He was the king of the Jews. Many of the spectators mocked, as did the Sanhedrin (claiming they would believe if He came down from the cross), and even the two thieves. Luke tells about the one thief who repents, berates his fellow-thief, and receives a promise of eternal life from Jesus.
- verses 33-37 - During the last three hours of Jesus' earthly life, darkness descended on the world. Just before Jesus' death, He called out the words of Psalm 22:1. He saw His death as a fulfillment of prophecy (these were not words of despair - the psalm He was quoting ends in the triumph of the Resurrection), but those around misunderstood, thinking He was calling for Elijah. One soldier offered Him sour wine, and He died shortly thereafter. Luke notes that just before His death, Jesus yielded up His spirit to the Father. John adds that Jesus requested the sour wine and records His triumphant cry, "It is finished!"
- verses 38-39 - The veil before the Holy of Holies in the Temple was torn from top to bottom (signifying that human mediators were no longer needed for man to enter the presence of God). Mark also records the comment of the centurion, "Surely this was a son of the gods"

- (this is a more accurate translation; the centurion was not asserting the deity of Christ, but was expressing in the language of his own religious system that Jesus was someone unusual).
- verses 40-41 - The disciples may have been in hiding (except for John), but the women who had followed Christ from Galilee were there to watch the end.

THE BURIAL OF JESUS (15:42-47 cf. Matthew 27:57-66; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:31-42)

Jesus had to be taken from the cross and buried before the onset of the Sabbath at sundown, so a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea, a follower of Jesus and a member of the Sanhedrin (Luke notes that Joseph had not been involved in Jesus' trial), asked Pilate for the body and buried Jesus in his own newly-cut tomb. Pilate was amazed that Jesus had died so soon - crucifixion victims sometimes suffered for days. John also notes that Nicodemus brought a large amount of spices to anoint Jesus' body (a Roman pound was 12 ounces, so this was about 75 pounds of spices - an amount befitting a king). The process of wrapping the body was begun, but not completed by sunset on Friday when the Sabbath officially started. Two of the women, Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother, witnessed the burial.

AFTER THE RESURRECTION (16:1-8 cf. Matthew 28:1-8; Luke 24:1-8; John 20:1-2)

- verses 1-2 - The Bible does not give a narrative of Jesus' Resurrection, but instead tells what happened afterward. Mary Magdalene, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Salome (not Herodias' daughter, obviously) came to anoint Jesus' body for burial early Sunday morning; they intended to finish the job they had started Friday afternoon before sunset.
- verses 3-4 - They were wondering how they could get to the body, but found the stone already rolled back (Matthew notes that an angel had caused an earthquake).
- verses 5-7 - This was an angel (Luke notes that there were two of them), who told the women of the Resurrection, and that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. Mark's separation of Peter reflects Peter's influence on the writing of Mark's Gospel and Peter's remorse over his denial of Christ.
- verse 8 - They left with a mixture of fear and joy (mentioned by Matthew). Note in passing that the remainder of Mark 16 (verses 9-20) is not found in the oldest manuscripts of the Bible and was probably added by later copyists.