

## THE GOSPEL OF MARK

### A YALE BIBLE STUDY

with Allen Hilton

### Session Seven – The Passion

14.1—15.47

As you reflect on your own life, can you identify a "most significant moment" -- a turning point that made a transformative difference in the way the rest of it went? I bet we could all track one or two, given some time to reflect.

It feels strange to ask whether Jesus had one – as the creeds have it he was born Son of God, “fully divine”, after all; but there is that “fully human” side of the formula, and surely he had turning points too. Was it hearing the divine voice call him “beloved Son” in the River Jordan? or the first time his healing power broke out? or his newly steely resolve to rebuke Peter’s protection at Caesarea Philippi? or hearing the baptismal assurance sequel in heady prophetic company at Transfiguration time?

Whatever pivot points turned Jesus toward his destiny, we now get to experience where it led: to a surreal Thursday evening meal with friends he knew would betray, deny, and abandon him; a moment of hesitating prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, a dark-eyed determination to see it all through arrest and trial and trial and torture...to the end.

#### Anticipation

We’ve been building toward this. A 19<sup>th</sup>-century German Bible scholar named Martin Kahler famously called the Gospel of Mark “a Passion Story with an extended introduction.” This is partly because Jesus’ crucifixion doesn’t just come up on his last Friday. It is foreshadowed throughout the story that you and I have been reading together for six weeks.

- As far back as Mark 3.6, the Pharisees and Herodians begin to plot Jesus’ demise.
- Three different times – Mark 8.31-33; 9.30-32; 10.32-34 – Jesus predicts his death to his disciples. (Of course, they never quite catch on!)
- We saw last session that while Jesus was teaching outside the Temple, the Jewish Leaders had hoped to arrest him, but could not, because they feared the crowds (Mark 12.12).

Now, in the Bethany home of his detractors, just outside Jerusalem, as Jesus begins to walk the dark steps toward his death, a woman pours expensive perfume on Jesus and wipes his feet with her hair and tears. The

Pharisees are appalled. Jesus sees it otherwise. This woman will go down in history, because, “She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial (14.8).”

## Reservations for Thirteen

When it comes time to book a room for the Passover feast, Jesus’ instructions to his disciples sound spy-like: “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.” This is the stuff of secret rendezvous and coded messages. We’ve already seen that Jesus has made enemies in Jerusalem. Here he seems to plot a dinner plan that will dodge danger. He has contacts.

Once again here we see the logic of the incognito Jesus – the Messianic Secret. He is who he is and has the plan that he has, but he flies under the radar in Mark, sufficiently to enter Jerusalem and do his work there.

## The Passover Feast

The Festival of Unleavened Bread instructions come from Moses: “On the first day you shall hold a solemn assembly, and on the seventh day a solemn assembly; no work shall be done on those days; only what everyone must eat, that alone may be prepared by you. <sup>17</sup>You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual ordinance.” (Exodus 12.6)

So, when Jesus and his disciples gather to eat that Thursday evening, they aren’t alone. The festival of unleavened bread is being celebrated in homes all around Jerusalem. But subsequent history sets this specific room and meal apart. One part of that uniqueness came in Jesus’ solemn prediction that his betrayer was sharing the meal with him. Imagine yourself as Jesus, serving and loving all twelve, even knowing what lay ahead.

*When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.’ They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, ‘Surely, not I?’ He said to them, ‘It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.’*

Incredibly, given the seismic impact of Jesus’ announcement, the supper goes on. Jesus’ next words are familiar to us. Imagine yourself as one of the disciples, though, already accustomed to the familiar words of Passover, but hearing Jesus’ self-referential words for the first time. Would you have understood?

*While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’ (Mark 14.12-21)*

Now imagine that you are in Mark’s community. Maybe you’ve just shared an agape feast or even the Lord’s Supper together. You’ve been doing it for some time. Some parts of the story have been spoken out as a part

of the ritual. But now it forms the climax of Markan build toward Jesus' passion. If they are riding along with Mark and hearing this fresh, they may even feel the bewilderment of the disciples. Perhaps there is an air of inevitability, as they see themselves in the story and relive their terror at Nero's savage persecutions. It cannot have been a light and joyful feast in either room. That will require a resurrection.

From ancient rooms to homes and church-houses across time, the Supper lives at the heart of Christian spirituality. The seventeenth-century English pastor George Herbert's poem, "Love III" personalizes that ancient meal's message to his and our lives.

**Love III**  
George Herbert

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
    If I lack'd anything.

"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here";  
    Love said, "You shall be he."  
"I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,  
    I cannot look on thee."  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
    "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve."  
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"  
    "My dear, then I will serve."  
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."  
    So I did sit and eat.

### **The Hymn**

We generally skip the hymn in our holy week. When we walk our holy week or even when we read the story, most of us imagine Jesus at table with the disciples, then walking those heavy steps to Gethsemane, where he will pray and they will sleep and he will be betrayed, then on to trial, denied by Peter. These are the cardinal moments in our annual observances. The hymn, we skip.

But there is a hymn. however brief is Mark's mention of it, "When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." (14.26) From ancient Jewish sources and subsequent tradition we can be almost certain what song Jesus and his disciples sing here. By the first century, the Hallel (Psalm 113—118) had become part of all Jewish feast days, and it especially featured on Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. By the time they leave dinner, they will have sung out the last of these six psalms: Psalm 118. I include the entire text of the here so you will (1) remember that Jesus spoke parts of this to his inquisitors on Tuesday and (2) imagine how it will have specific meaning for Jesus as he walks toward Gethsemane and trials and crucifixion.

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever!  
Let Israel say,  
“His steadfast love endures forever.”  
Let the house of Aaron say,  
“His steadfast love endures forever.”  
Let those who fear the Lord say,  
“His steadfast love endures forever.”  
Out of my distress I called on the Lord;  
the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.  
With the Lord on my side I do not fear.  
What can mortals do to me?  
The Lord is on my side to help me;  
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.  
It is better to take refuge in the Lord  
than to put confidence in mortals.  
It is better to take refuge in the Lord  
than to put confidence in princes.  
All nations surrounded me;  
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!  
They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;  
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!  
They surrounded me like bees;  
they blazed like a fire of thorns;  
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!  
I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,  
but the Lord helped me.  
The Lord is my strength and my might;  
he has become my salvation.  
There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:  
  
“The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;  
the right hand of the Lord is exalted;  
the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.”  
  
I shall not die, but I shall live,  
and recount the deeds of the Lord.  
The Lord has punished me severely,  
but he did not give me over to death.  
Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the Lord.  
This is the gate of the Lord;  
the righteous shall enter through it.  
I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.  
The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.*

*This is the Lord's doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.  
This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!  
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.  
We bless you from the house of the Lord.  
The Lord is God,  
and he has given us light.  
Bind the festal procession with branches,  
up to the horns of the altar.  
You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
you are my God, I will extol you.  
O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

Do you remember?

- Rejected. In 8.31, Jesus may allude to this Psalm 118.22 when he prepaints the picture of his passion. “The stone that the builders rejected” in the Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures (LXX) features the same Greek verb form as “the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law.”
- Save! In 11.9-10, the crowds shout “Hosanna” (“Save us!”) and “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” which quote and paraphrase Psalm 118.25-26.
- Cornerstone. In 12.10-11, Jesus ends his parable of the wicked tenants with a quotation of Psalm 118.22-23:

“‘The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
the Lord has done this,  
and it is marvelous in our eyes?’”

- Supper. Finally, at Supper’s end, the scriptural table has literally been set, for the disciples, for Mark’s room-full, and for us.

In Mark’s subtle, Spirit-guided hands, Psalm 118 weaves its way like a scarlet thread through Jesus’ march to the cross.

### **The Prayer of Gethsemane**

Caesarea Philippi (8.31ff.) shows up in Jerusalem, when Jesus’ thoughts echo Peter’s thoughts. Back in those Galilean days, Jesus called Peter Satan for even suggesting it. Now, he must answer himself.

Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane lives on as a moment of exquisite divine obedience in the face of natural human fear. We should imagine supreme intensity. In his retelling, Luke even has Jesus sweat blood.

This is a moment of testing more focused than the temptations in the wilderness, after which Jesus needed angel attendants' care.

It is human frailty Jesus battles in the Garden of Gethsemane. It's one thing to know suffering lies ahead; entirely another to face it when it arrives. No wonder Jesus is "deeply grieved, to the point of death." Perhaps for the first time, on the eve of his crucifixion, he feels the full weight of his mission.

His prayer is intimate and honest. "Abba, Father...remove this cup from me!" Like the psalmists he has read since youth, he cries out honestly to God: "Remove this cup!"

Jesus' anguish at Gethsemane is extreme! But later Christians realized that anything less might have given him less access to us. Years later, one pondered Jesus' anguish: "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (Hebrews 2.18)." Love shows up amid the anguish.

For the poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox, this anguished moment comes across the years to teach us...if we will allow.

**Gethsemane**  
Ella Wheeler Wilcox

In golden youth when seems the earth  
A Summer-land of singing mirth,  
When souls are glad and hearts are light,  
And not a shadow lurks in sight,  
We do not know it, but there lies  
Somewhere veiled under evening skies  
A garden which we all must see --  
The garden of Gethsemane.

With joyous steps we go our ways,  
Love lends a halo to our days;  
Light sorrows sail like clouds afar,  
We laugh and say how strong we are.  
We hurry on; and hurrying, go  
Close to the border-land of woe,  
That waits for you, and waits for me --  
For ever waits Gethsemane.

Down shadowy lanes, across strange streams,  
Bridged over by our broken dreams;  
Behind the misty caps of years,  
Beyond the great salt fount of tears,  
The garden lies. Strive as you may,  
You cannot miss it in your way.  
All paths that have been, or shall be,  
Pass somewhere through Gethsemane.

All those who journey, soon or late,  
Must pass within the garden's gate;  
Must kneel alone in darkness there,  
And battle with some fierce despair.  
God pity those who cannot say,  
“Not mine but thine,” who only pray,  
“Let this cup pass,” and cannot see  
The *purpose* in Gethsemane.

## **Betrayal and the Turn of the Crowd**

We have been tracking Jesus' crowds from the beginning of our journey through Mark. Way back in chapters 1–3 we watched as they grew exponentially in response to Jesus “amazing” teaching and “astonishing” wonders. We even stopped in 4.1 to notice that he needed a boat to teach, because there was no room among the throngs on the shore. Several times throughout the book, Jesus' crowds have even protected him from the harmful designs of his opponents, both in Galilee and in Jerusalem.

As we've watched this, we have wondered together, “How will Jesus' opponents finally penetrate the popularity bubble that shields him?” On Thursday night we get our answer.

*Just as Jesus was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders.*

The Jewish officials in power in Jerusalem, still stinging from defeat on Monday and Tuesday, have gathered their own crowd. Mark doesn't tell us whether this is a counter-crowd, raised from among the masses, or part of Jesus' lot who have shifted their allegiance.

The pin-prick to the bubble is Judas. He is like the mole in the spy drama...but with no prior commission or reason for this new loyalty. In Mark, no motive is supplied to Judas beyond the cash; and even that thread is thin, since Judas approached Jesus' opponents before he knew they would pay. (14.10-11) Through the ages, of course, other motives have been supplied.

In Mark, Judas simply betrays Jesus. Other Gospel writers add details about the instigation and incentive. Luke and John tell us that Satan/the Devil enters Judas (Luke 22.3 and John 13.2), and John demonizes Judas even further: “he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it (John 12.6).” Some scholars imagine that this extreme treatment of Judas goes beyond the specific act of betraying Jesus and reflects the experience of the early Christians. When those Christians were persecuted, some recanted their faith. To the others who remained faithful, that flimsiness was regrettable. But what really threatened the lot was when others reported Christians to the authority. They could hear a knock at their door any minute. In other words, the later versions of Peter's denial show weakness. Judas' behavior repeated makes things dangerous.

## **The Lessons of Betrayal**

The Christian author Henry Nouwen moves another set of questions through the Gethsemane text:

With the reality of betrayal looming in all of our lives, this passage can offer us a template for how to handle such pain and disappointment. In all three cases of betrayal, we see Jesus accepting his angst, but each time reframing the situation for himself on his own terms. Rather than staying bitter and resentful, Jesus *chooses* to move forward with acceptance and fortitude. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankel describes this spiritual truth, as he experienced it as a prisoner in a Nazi Concentration Camp. Frankel writes that his fellow prisoners taught him that, *"everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."*

This is the example that Jesus offers us.

- When confronted by his sleeping friends, Jesus ultimately chooses acceptance lamenting that their, "spirits are willing but their flesh is weak". Then, even in his disappointment, he encourages them to move onward, despite their weakness, towards His destiny.
- When confronted by the deafening silence of God in the Garden, Jesus does not dwell in bitterness, but chooses surrender, saying, "Yet, not what I want, but what you want."
- Finally, as Judas hands him over to the authorities, Jesus chooses dignity, reminding them that he never hid from them, "like a bandit", but taught in the temple daily.
- He ends by *choosing* to go with them saying, "let the scriptures be fulfilled."

Jesus is never the victim of betrayal, but always the victor, by how he chooses to respond.

Frankel calls this decision to, "choose one's response to suffering, an inner achievement ... It is this spiritual freedom, that cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful." So, when we feel betrayed, in big or small ways, may we follow the example of our Lord-- to *choose* our own versions of acceptance, surrender to God, and dignity. May we follow Jesus – even through the dark valley of betrayal. (Credit to Leslie Neugent, Wayzata Community Church)

### **The Jewish Leaders' Trial**

From betrayal, Jesus is hauled to trial before the very people he has embarrassed all week. The trial is swift in Mark's telling. Their questions are telling:

First, they revisit Jesus' prophetic throw-down in the Temple from Monday. *"We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.'" (14.58)* Jesus makes no answer to this charge. He has not spoken those words publicly, though in 13.2 he has quipped to his disciples about the Temple's and city's imminent demise. (You may recall that the absence of specifics about the fall of the great Temple and city has led scholars to place Mark's Gospel prior to A.D. 70.)

Next, the council focuses their interrogation on his identity. *"Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" (14.61)* Jesus actually answers here: *"I am."* They will need no more. *"Why do we need any more witnesses?" the Chief Priest asked. "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"* The verdict did not take long. *They all condemned him as worthy of death.*

The final insult of the first trial rivets on the wide perception of Jesus' work: he's a prophet like Elijah and John and the others. The council members blindfold Jesus and begin to pummel Jesus and then mockingly taunt, *"Prophecy!"* On to Pontius Pilate they go.

### **Denial!**

A servant girl recognizes Peter as a Jesus guy. “I don’t know...what you are talking about!” She won’t relent. Again, Peter says no. The third accusation comes from the crowd: “Why else would a Galilean be here?” Peter is vehement: “I don’t know this man!” The rooster reminds Peter that Jesus saw this coming. He collapses in tears.

The most we ever draw, even for the most overt acts of faith, are strange looks. At this remove, Peter’s denials may seem weak to us – until we look inside and examine our own frailty. That honest inward glance is our only hope to manage a measure of proper humility.

The last word has not yet been spoken – on Peter or on us. Christian legend says that years later Peter faced another trial in Rome before an even greater power. When Emperor Nero’s henchmen asked, Peter got his second chance, and this time he was ready: “You bet I was with him!” he said. And he was crucified for it. When it came time to hoist him on a cross, he refused. “I don’t deserve His glory. Put me upside down!” Humility indeed!

### **The Roman Trial**

Pilate is less vitriolic. In fact, Jesus’ case seems a trivial inconvenience to him. Amid the many accusations the Jewish Council presents to Pilate, only one gets to the heart of the Roman issue: “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” Pilate has no in the details of Jewish religion or charges of blasphemy. He does, however, have to be concerned with potential Jewish coups and insurrection. Jesus answers cagily: “*You’ve said it.*” But as the Council’s accusations multiply, Jesus wins Pilate’s amazement with his own silence. As he watches, Pilate sizes up the situation and assesses the accusers’ motives. As we’ve seen, he ultimately attributes the falderal to the Council’s jealousy: *he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over.*

The next action seals Jesus’ anticipated fate. Pilate had an amnesty tradition connected to Passover: one prisoner at the peoples’ request. (Another indicator that even the might of Rome sought popular support to solidify their power.) When Pilate appealed to the crowd, perhaps frustrated by Pilate’s apparent disinterest, *the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.* With Jesus imprisoned, his opponents jump into the charisma vacuum and seize the moment.

The rest is sad, poignant, profound Good Friday history. The crowd opts to favor a real insurrectionist, the Priests successfully put away the blasphemer who has exposed them, and the death that changed history is next.

### **Crucifixion**

Mark tells the cross briefly and paints Jesus’ anguish vividly. Worshippers who have walked Good Friday in churches are familiar with the “Seven Last Words” of Jesus, taken from the four Gospels in collage. In Mark, we hear Jesus speak only one of those “words”, to shout an derelict utterance from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!” Bystanders mistake Jesus’ Aramaic as a cry for Elijah and then belittle him for it.

The next sound we hear is an inarticulate cry, this time as Jesus dies. The scene shifts briefly to the Temple, where Jesus’ death splits open the enormous curtain that separates worshippers from God’s direct presence. How does this death tear down that wall?

The scene and the Gospel both culminate, ironically, with the words of a Roman soldier. Throughout the book, people have asked, “Who is this?” Thus far, only the narrator (in the first sentence of the book, Mark 1.1), God (at Jesus’ baptism, Mark 1.11), and some demons (when Jesus is about to toss them out of someone, Mark 4.11) have really gotten the answer right.

On the other hand, no human character has “gotten it”. Everyone swings and misses. The people around him have done their best. Some think he’s John the Baptist’s ghost. Others say that he’s the Hebrew prophet Elijah revisited. Opponents imagine he’s a demon master. Peter comes close once when he says, “Aha! You are the Messiah!” But even Peter can’t get his head around the idea that a Messiah could die (Mark 8.27-33).

Back to that soldier. He’s charged to stand guard at the execution. It’s not his first, but this death stands out. When Jesus said, “The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10.45),” the soldier didn’t hear. He didn’t hear the arguing over Jesus’ crime; or the priests raging; or Pilate equivocating. He cannot see a Temple curtain tear. He has none of the clues.

This soldier’s only acquaintance with Jesus is this wretched death – what Bernard of Clairvaux will one day call his “dying sorrow.” But somehow the death – absolutely the last thing one would normally associate with immortal gods or God – is enough. Seeing Jesus breathe his last, this nameless soldier gazes up and speaks the words with which Mark’s Gospel began: “Surely this man was God’s son.” For Mark, the moment when Jesus most clearly reveals his divinity is not in the healings, the walking on water, the feedings, or even the transfiguration. For Mark, Jesus is most clearly (if not obviously) divine when he is looking altogether mortal – when he is dying.

Jesus’ disciples did not catch the clue. The women who have been watching from the fringe of his entourage are Jesus’ only friendly company as he dies.

## What’s Next

09NOV20      Resurrection (Mark 16.1-8)

*One whole session for eight verses. Wow! That must mean they’re important. It also means that we have an opportunity to notice things. Why the mysterious absence of Jesus’ male disciples and silence of his female disciples at the empty tomb? How has the whole Gospel led to this moment? And how does this moment lead to the whole future of Christ’s church? In this session, we’ll bring our study of this powerful Gospel to a significant close, asking how the whole book matters for our whole lives.*

Preparation:

- There is near consensus among NT scholars that the Gospel ends at 16.8. Why do you imagine early Christians who copied Mark’s manuscript or copies of it eventually added the stories we see in the verses that follow 16.8 in your Bible?
- Think of the last Easter service you attended. Did you hear the Gospel of Mark? Or did you hear about Jesus appearing to his disciples in Matthew, Luke, or John. What in the world is Mark doing by finishing his story with disciples who are scared out of their minds? And what is his Easter message?
- Does it mean anything that the women disciples show up on Sunday, while the men stay locked away somewhere?
- What themes that you’ve learned from reading the rest of the Gospel make their way

into the way the resurrection happens?

- How does this resurrection scene impact the way you live your life now?