

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week Five

Throughout Leap of Faith, we will walk together through the entire story of the ministry of Jesus, at least as it is told by Mark. Mark is one of the early followers of Jesus. He may or may not have known Jesus himself, but he was probably a traveling companion of the apostle Simon Peter. Simon Peter never wrote a history of Jesus himself, but John Mark collected and wrote down Simon Peter's story. I'm sure that as you read you'll see that Peter's perspective comes out strongly, and that it's a really valuable perspective to have. Mark's gospel (which means 'good news') was the first one written, about 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Incidentally, it's also the shortest. That means that, when we read it over 40 days, each day's passage should be of a quite manageable size. The size does vary a bit, as I've sectioned it in such a way as to make good sense of the stories, rather than just dividing it into equal-sized bits.

Each day's guide is broken into three sections:

1. **The story for the day.** For your convenience, we've included the text of the story in the *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996). As I've worked on this guide, I've found this translation to be in fresh, modern language that has really helped me to do what I most want to do: enter into the story myself. As you read the passage, try to read it from the perspective of the disciples and the other people who interact with Jesus. Really get inside the story. What is it like to go through this experience with Jesus?
2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions addressed, and gives suggestions of ways to look at the story and what it might mean for us.
3. **Taking it home.** In this section, I offer some suggestions for how the day's reading might apply to you, to your six, and to our church.

March 17

Mark 11: 27-12: 12—By whose authority?

²⁷ By this time they had arrived in Jerusalem again. As Jesus was walking through the Temple area, the leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the other leaders came up to him. They demanded, ²⁸ "By whose authority did you drive out the merchants from the Temple? Who gave you such authority?" ²⁹ "I'll tell who gave me authority to do these things if you answer one question," Jesus replied. ³⁰ "Did John's baptism come from heaven or was it merely human? Answer me!" ³¹ They talked it over among themselves. "If we say it was from heaven, he will ask why we didn't believe him. ³² But do we dare say it was merely human?" For they were afraid that the people would start a riot, since everyone thought that John was a prophet. ³³ So they finally replied, "We don't know." And Jesus responded, "Then I won't answer your question either." **12** Then Jesus began telling them stories: "A man planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country. ² At grape-picking time he sent one of his servants to collect his share of the crop. ³ But the farmers grabbed the servant, beat him up, and sent him back empty-handed. ⁴ "The owner then sent another servant, but they beat him over the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵ The next servant he sent was killed. Others who were sent were either beaten or killed, ⁶ until there was only one left—his son whom he loved dearly. The owner finally sent him, thinking, 'Surely they will respect my son.' ⁷ "But the farmers said to one another, 'Here comes the heir to this estate. Let's kill him and get the estate for ourselves!' ⁸ So they grabbed him and murdered him and threw his body out of the vineyard. ⁹ "What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do?" Jesus asked. "I'll tell you—he will come and kill them all and lease the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures?"

'The stone rejected by the builders
has now become the cornerstone.

11 This is the Lord's doing,
and it is marvelous to see.' "

12 The Jewish leaders wanted to arrest him for using this illustration because they realized he was pointing at them—they were the wicked farmers in his story. But they were afraid to touch him because of the crowds. So they left him and went away.

Points of Interest:

- 'Who gave you such authority?'—The leaders are accusing Jesus of vigilantism. They are certain that they are the proper authorities, and they know that they haven't given him permission to do what he did. From their perspective, they've caught him in a rash, improper act; and with this problem they are intending to let him know that they now have him in their power. Instead, Jesus ends up presenting them with a puzzle that demonstrates just how limited their authority really is.
- 'We don't know.'—The leaders think that they are being evasive; they are avoiding giving a direct answer to Jesus' question. Ironically, their answer is profoundly true. While they claim that they don't know, it seems that they think that they really do know that John's baptism is only human. If that is the case, they are mistaken and therefore, in point of fact, do not know.

But their profession that they don't know is true on an even deeper level than that. The leaders don't know because they don't really even try to figure it out. They have not really addressed the question in terms of truth, but only in terms of consequences. Their answer is a political answer, formulated to cause the least public relations damage. They do not know the source of John's baptism because they have not bothered to even try to find out. They do not know because they operate in a system that ignores genuine seeking of answers. They never even really consider looking for the truth of the matter.

- 'Then I won't answer your question either'—Jesus calls it like it is. They claim that they don't know, but Jesus lets them know that he knows that they are instead refusing to answer. He refuses to respond to their question in return for a couple of reasons:
 1. He doesn't feel the need to interact with people who are playing a public relations game rather than genuinely relating to him.
 2. He has already given them what they need to answer their own question, but they have refused to engage. His answer to their question is essentially, 'My authority comes from the same place as John's baptism.' John's baptism of Jesus was Jesus' coronation ceremony, at which the Father's voice validated Jesus' ministry. If they knew where John's baptism came from, they would know Jesus' authority. But their refusal to consider Jesus' question cuts them off from the answer to their own.
- 'he sent one of his servants to collect his share of the crop'—The tenants probably feel like the owner's desire to have a share is greedy and unjust: 'We did all of the harvesting. Why should he get a share?' But they forget that the land belongs to him, and that he has actually put a lot of work into it to make it a good vineyard: he built the wall, the tower, and the winepress; and he did the planting. They were lucky to get the chance to work in such a vineyard. The owner certainly deserves his share.
- 'Surely they will respect my son'—This is an amazing little story! First of all, it's another answer to their question about his authority. Jesus actually uses the story to turn the leaders' question around on them. The Vineyard is either the temple or the people of God, and the fruit is worship and prayer (like in the example of the fig tree). Jesus is, of course, the son; and his authority comes from the Father, the owner of the Vineyard, by whom he was sent. The leaders are represented by the tenants, and it is they, not Jesus, who have usurped someone else's authority. Like the tenants, the leaders have begun to act like owners of something for which they are only caretakers. The temple and its offerings belong to God, but the leaders have been taking the profit for themselves. They are the ones who have acted without authority. John the Baptist and other prophets have come in the past to

get them to turn around, but they've ignored and abused them. With this story, Jesus predicts that they will do the same to him, killing him. He also predicts that they will not enjoy the benefits of their scheme for long. Soon, charge of God's people will be given to others.

- 'Let's kill him and get the estate'—The tenants start out just wanting to hold back a little fruit; murder was not on their mind. But as they harden their hearts, insistent on not listening to the messages, they move by slow degrees from holding back fruit, through beating and abuse, to murder and even murder of the owner's son.
- 'they were afraid to touch him because of the crowds'—The leaders begin this passage by questioning Jesus' authority and presenting themselves as the legitimate authority, but their actions demonstrate their own lack of authority. Jesus offers two potential sources of authority: heaven and mere humans. Throughout this passage, by basing their decision on fears of the crowd, the leaders demonstrate that the basis of their authority is human, and that it is a weak authority at that—they pretend to be authorities, but they are controlled by the crowds.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Just like the temple, every once in a while our hearts need to have a clearing out of the other things that have come in and crowded out prayer and worship. Like the Vineyard owner in the story, God sends us messages and promptings by his Spirit when this needs to happen. Has God been sending you messages of ways you need to clean your heart? How have you responded to these promptings? Ask God to give you a soft heart to these promptings. The story of the Vineyard shows just how much God wants to be in good relationship to him, and just how far we can get from him when we refuse to listen to him.
- *For your six:* The leaders are too afraid of the consequences to interact with Jesus genuinely. In attempts to maintain their own power and dignity, they seal themselves off from truly considering Jesus' words. This refusal will have a disastrous effect on their future. Pray that God would protect your six from this fear of consequences. Pray that the Holy Spirit would give them the boldness and trust to interact with Jesus' genuinely. Pray that attempts to maintain their own power or dignity would not keep them from honestly seeking Jesus.
- *For our church:* The leaders in this passage have begun to think of themselves as the owners of something that actually belonged to God. Pray that God would preserve us from the same error, that our hearts would always recognize God's good provision for us, and that we would always give him his due worship.

March 18

Mark 12: 13-27—The traps of the Pharisees and Sadducees

¹³ The leaders sent some Pharisees and supporters of Herod to try to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested. ¹⁴ "Teacher," these men said, "we know how honest you are. You are impartial and don't play favorites. You sincerely teach the ways of God. Now tell us—is it right to pay taxes to the Roman government or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay them, or should we not?" Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and said, "Whom are you trying to fool with your trick questions? Show me a Roman coin, and I'll tell you." ¹⁶ When they handed it to him, he asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?" "Caesar's," they replied. ¹⁷ "Well, then," Jesus said, "give to Caesar what belongs to him. But everything that belongs to God must be given to God." This reply completely amazed them. ¹⁸ Then the Sadducees stepped forward—a group of Jews who say there is no resurrection after death. They posed this question: ¹⁹ "Teacher, Moses gave us a law that if a man dies, leaving a wife without children, his brother should marry the widow and have a child who will be the brother's heir. ²⁰ Well, there were seven brothers. The oldest of them married and then died without children. ²¹ So the second brother married the widow, but soon he too died and left no children. Then the next brother married her and died without children. ²² This continued until all the brothers had married her and died, and still there were no children. Last of all, the woman died, too. ²³ So tell us, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? For all seven were married to her." ²⁴ Jesus replied, "Your problem is that you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God. ²⁵ For when the

dead rise, they won't be married. They will be like the angels in heaven. ²⁶ But now, as to whether the dead will be raised—haven't you ever read about this in the writings of Moses, in the story of the burning bush? Long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, God said to Moses, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' ²⁷ So he is the God of the living, not the dead. You have made a serious error."

Points of Interest:

- 'we know how honest you are'—again, the leaders are ironically truthful. They are intending to flatter Jesus, but they are actually telling the truth: he is indeed honest, sincere, and impartial. Meanwhile, in these very words they are being deceitful, partial, and insincere.
- 'is it right to pay taxes?'—The leaders think that they have given Jesus a political puzzle on a par with the one he gave them the day before. Taxes are always a tricky political issue. If Jesus says it is wrong to pay taxes, he will be in trouble with the Romans. And it's always unpopular with the crowds to endorse taxes.
- 'Whose picture and title are on it?'—Jesus' answer is disarming and profound. Obviously, if the coin has Caesar's name and picture on it, it belongs to him. How can anyone argue with that? His addition, 'everything that belongs to God must be given to him,' is where his answer becomes profound. How do we know what belongs to God? In the same way we can tell that the coin belongs to Caesar: whatever bears his name and picture belong to God. This would apply to the temple. It would also apply to Jesus, God's son; ironically, the priests are about to hand Jesus, who belongs to God, over to Caesar. Finally, all people belong to God. In the book of Genesis, at the creation of human beings, it is said that we are made in God's likeness; we all bear his picture. Since we bear his picture, we belong to him. To Jesus, the question of taxes is insignificant in light of this profound insight.
- 'the Sadducees'—The Pharisees, who we've seen a lot of, and the Sadducees, who we first meet here, are the two major political/religious parties of the Jews. The Pharisees are upper middle class and religiously conservative, as we've seen. They are the dominant party among the teachers of the law. The Sadducees are much more urbane and liberal. They are the upper class, heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, and, therefore, suspicious of the supernatural. They are the dominant party among the priests. The Pharisees and Sadducees are naturally enemies (as both are with the Herodians), but they are brought together in a common desire to get rid of Jesus, who threatens the popularity and power of all of them.
- 'For all seven were married to her'—Once the Pharisees have tried their best and been thwarted, the Sadducees step up to bat. They bring Jesus their best stumper, the one they use in their arguments with the Pharisees all the time. The idea is, of course, that the idea of rising from the dead is illogical because this hypothetical woman cannot be married to seven different men at the same time. While the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus, the Sadducees are trying to make him look like a fool.
- 'You have made a serious error'—although they may not even be aware of it, they are bringing up an issue in which Jesus has large personal stakes: he knows he is going to die within days, and he is depending on the reality of the resurrection. He has also promised all of his followers that if they die for his sake they will receive new life. Therefore, Jesus responds quite strongly.
- 'they won't be married'—In their supposedly air-tight argument against the resurrection, they make a very big, and mistaken, assumption in Jesus' estimation: they have assumed that heaven is just like earth. It is just the sort of assumption that someone who does not believe in the supernatural would be prone to make. But if that assumption is untrue, their whole argument unravels.
- 'you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God'—these so-called religious leaders are making such basic errors that it's clear they don't know God's power or his words at all. Knowing God's words and his power are two powerful ingredients to being able to know God. God's words can teach us about God's power and God's power helps us to interpret God's words for our situation and make real contact with God. When both are

together, they provide a strong, living connection to God. With neither, it is difficult not to seriously misunderstand God.

- 'haven't you ever read about the burning bush'—Jesus is making fun of them a little here. Of course they know the story about the burning bush: it's one of the most famous moments in Jewish history. They've read it plenty of times, but they've never really understood its significance.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus is staking his life on the resurrection from the dead, and he asks his followers to do the same. Do you, like the Sadducees, have doubts that the resurrection from the dead is true? If so, bring those doubts to Jesus in prayer. Unless he assures you of the resurrection, it is impossible to truly follow him. Ask him to point you to his words and to meet you with his power to give you the understanding you need.
- *For your six:* What are the questions that keep your six from faith in Jesus? Do you think they need to know more of God's word, more of his power, or both? Are there stories from the Bible you could tell them that might address their question in a surprising way? Pray for them that God's power would give them insight into their questions.
- *For our church:* If we continue to follow in Jesus' footsteps as a church, we—like him—will gain enemies that want to trap us. Ask the Holy Spirit to give us surprising, provocative, insightful answers like the Spirit gave to Jesus.

March 19

Mark 12: 28-44—The most important commandment

²⁸ One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the discussion. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" ²⁹ Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. ³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' ³¹ The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these." ³² The teacher of religious law replied, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other. ³³ And I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbors as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law." ³⁴ Realizing this man's understanding, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions. ³⁵ Later, as Jesus was teaching the people in the Temple, he asked, "Why do the teachers of religious law claim that the Messiah will be the son of David? ³⁶ For David himself, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said,

"The LORD said to my Lord,
Sit in honor at my right hand
until I humble your enemies beneath your feet."

³⁷ Since David himself called him Lord, how can he be his son at the same time?" And the crowd listened to him with great interest. ³⁸ Here are some of the other things he taught them at this time: "Beware of these teachers of religious law! For they love to parade in flowing robes and to have everyone bow to them as they walk in the marketplaces. ³⁹ And how they love the seats of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. ⁴⁰ But they shamelessly cheat widows out of their property, and then, to cover up the kind of people they really are, they make long prayers in public. Because of this, their punishment will be the greater." ⁴¹ Jesus went over to the collection box in the Temple and sat and watched as the crowds dropped in their money. Many rich people put in large amounts. ⁴² Then a poor widow came and dropped in two pennies. ⁴³ He called his disciples to him and said, "I assure you, this poor widow has given more than all the others have given. ⁴⁴ For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she has."

Points of Interest:

- 'He realized that Jesus had answered well'—here is a religious leader who is not trying to trap Jesus. He is better soil than the other leaders who either don't understand Jesus' words

or respond by hating him all the more. He has actually been listening, and wants to hear more. The question he asks is probably not because he is completely ignorant of the answer. This teacher would think about this question all the time, and he would have his own opinion. But he's interested in what Jesus would say, and he invites Jesus to dialogue with him.

- 'Hear, O Israel . . . '—the first of the 10 Commandments. It can be found in the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 6:5. The teacher asks Jesus about the most important commandment, but Jesus responds with the top two. He's accepting the teacher's invitation to dialogue and continuing the conversation. He's also giving the man more words in response to his good soil. The first commandment is kind of easy pickin's: it would be no surprise that the first of the 10 Commandments would be pretty important. The second one Jesus mentions shows a little more insight. It's actually a little more obscure than one might think: it's tucked away in a long list of commandments in Leviticus 19: 18. But Jesus sees that that commandment ably summarizes what all of those other commandments are about.
- 'Realizing this man's understanding'—The man adds a little insight of his own: that these two commandments to love are more important than the offerings and sacrifices at the temple. Jesus is impressed that a religious teacher who works in the temple would have the clarity to see that love is more important than the offerings and sacrifices which are the temple's main business. Unlike the Sadducees, this man knows the scripture. He isn't just familiar with the words, but he understands what they mean. He can see that if you add up all the sacrifices ever given in the temple, they aren't as important as love. Meanwhile, the other temple leaders are trying to kill Jesus—we could safely say that is not love—in order to protect the illicit profits they make from the sacrifices.
- 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God'—despite all of his insight, this scribe is only 'not far' from the kingdom of God. Somewhat reminiscent of the rich man who did all the neighbor-related commandments, this teacher still lacks something. Perhaps what he lacks is the experience of loving God. He knows that loving God is important, but he discusses it abstractedly. It's just a matter of knowledge and understanding to him. His knowledge, insightful though it is, is not enough. He actually needs to step beyond his intellectual understanding into actual loving God and his neighbors with his life. Perhaps this man knows the scripture, but he doesn't really know yet the power of God to make an actual difference in his life.
- 'Why do the teachers of religious law claim that the Messiah will be the son of David?'—David was the greatest king of all Israel, and his reign (which was about a thousand years before Jesus) was the golden age of the Jews. The teachers were presenting the Messiah's reign as a sort of return to that golden age. The Messiah would be like David's 'chip off the old block.' He'd make things almost as good—perhaps even as good—as they were under David. The Messiah's greatness would be a sort of inheritance from David. Jesus points out here that David himself (in Psalm 110) expected the Messiah to be greater than David. David was only a little preview of the Messiah, not the standard to which the Messiah would be compared. The golden age of David was nothing in light of the coming Kingdom of the Messiah. No wonder the crowds are excited.
- 'how they love the seats of honor'—In yesterday's passage, Jesus told the teachers to give to God what belongs to God. Here we see that instead of leading people toward God they are leading people toward themselves: they take the honor for themselves, as well as stealing people's money.
- 'this poor widow has given more than all the others have given'—Jesus doesn't look at the absolute value of the gift. On a percentage basis, the widow gives much more than her wealthier fellows. Most of them would have given ten percent, but she gives 100. The impressiveness goes beyond mere percentages, though. She could have given just one of her coins and still given 50% of what she had—5 times the percentage of the others. But she gives both coins. When she gives both coins, she is giving God what belongs to God: she's putting her life in God's hands. She is giving herself to God, and trusting him to provide for her.

In discussing the rich man who went away sad (ch. 10: 31, March 27th), Jesus says, 'But many who seem to be important now will be the least important then, and those who are considered least here will be the greatest then.' Here we see a prime example: this widow is able to do what the rich man could not—give everything—, and she is honored by Jesus. She is the greatest because she knows and acts on the teacher's insight from earlier in the passage: that loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength is more important than sacrifices and offerings. God does not need the money that all the wealthier people are giving, but he wants people's hearts and lives. That's what the widow offers when she gives her last coins.

Jesus went to the temple expecting prayer and worship. Instead, he found robbery and hypocrisy. The teacher of the law comes close to genuine worship, but finally with this woman Jesus finds one example of what the temple should have been filled with.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The Jews were hoping that the Messiah would be able to restore the kingdom of David, but Jesus told them to expect much more. What do you hope that Jesus' kingdom will measure up to? What is your definition of the good life? Ask Jesus to expand your expectations.
- *For your six:* What do your six already know about God? Are they acting on what they know? Encourage your six to step forward in what they know. Ask God to give them the faith they need to do it, and ask him to meet them when they step forward in faith.
- *For our church:* The religious teachers looked good, but there were all sorts of hypocrisy and wickedness beneath the surface. Ask the Holy Spirit to give us pure hearts of genuine worship of God and love of others.

March 20

Mark 13—Things to come

As Jesus was leaving the Temple that day, one of his disciples said, "Teacher, look at these tremendous buildings! Look at the massive stones in the walls!"² Jesus replied, "These magnificent buildings will be so completely demolished that not one stone will be left on top of another."³ Later, Jesus sat on the slopes of the Mount of Olives across the valley from the Temple. Peter, James, John, and Andrew came to him privately and asked him,⁴ "When will all this take place? And will there be any sign ahead of time to show us when all this will be fulfilled?"⁵ Jesus replied, "Don't let anyone mislead you,⁶ because many will come in my name, claiming to be the Messiah. They will lead many astray.⁷ And wars will break out near and far, but don't panic. Yes, these things must come, but the end won't follow immediately.⁸ Nations and kingdoms will proclaim war against each other, and there will be earthquakes in many parts of the world, and famines. But all this will be only the beginning of the horrors to come.⁹ But when these things begin to happen, watch out! You will be handed over to the courts and beaten in the synagogues. You will be accused before governors and kings of being my followers. This will be your opportunity to tell them about me.¹⁰ And the Good News must first be preached to every nation.¹¹ But when you are arrested and stand trial, don't worry about what to say in your defense. Just say what God tells you to. Then it is not you who will be speaking, but the Holy Spirit.¹² "Brother will betray brother to death, fathers will betray their own children, and children will rise against their parents and cause them to be killed.¹³ And everyone will hate you because of your allegiance to me. But those who endure to the end will be saved.¹⁴ The time will come when you will see the sacrilegious object that causes desecration standing where it should not be"—reader, pay attention! "Then those in Judea must flee to the hills.¹⁵ A person outside the house must not go back into the house to pack.¹⁶ A person in the field must not return even to get a coat.¹⁷ How terrible it will be for pregnant women and for mothers nursing their babies in those days.¹⁸ And pray that your flight will not be in winter.¹⁹ For those will be days of greater horror than at any time since God created the world. And it will never happen again.²⁰ In fact, unless the Lord shortens that time of calamity, the entire human race will be destroyed. But for the sake of his chosen ones he has shortened those days.²¹ And then if anyone tells you, 'Look, here is the Messiah,' or,

'There he is,' don't pay any attention. ²² For false messiahs and false prophets will rise up and perform miraculous signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even God's chosen ones. ²³ Watch out! I have warned you!

²⁴ "At that time, after those horrible days end,
the sun will be darkened,
the moon will not give light,
²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,
and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

²⁶ Then everyone will see the Son of Man arrive on the clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send forth his angels to gather together his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven. ²⁸ Now, learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its buds become tender and its leaves begin to sprout, you know without being told that summer is near. ²⁹ Just so, when you see the events I've described beginning to happen, you can be sure that his return is very near, right at the door. ³⁰ I assure you, this generation will not pass from the scene until all these events have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will remain forever. ³² However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. ³³ And since you don't know when they will happen, stay alert and keep watch. ³⁴ The coming of the Son of Man can be compared with that of a man who left home to go on a trip. He gave each of his employees instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return. ³⁵ So keep a sharp lookout! For you do not know when the homeowner will return—at evening, midnight, early dawn, or late daybreak. ³⁶ Don't let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning. ³⁷ What I say to you I say to everyone: Watch for his return!"

My interpretation

This passage is significantly different in style and content to what we have encountered so far in Mark. Here, Jesus takes on the role of prophet, and he speaks the language of a prophet, making references to Old Testament prophecies and using the colorful, dense imagery that is characteristic of Hebrew prophets, especially in prophecies about cataclysmic events. In order to more clearly unpack what Jesus might be saying, rather than taking it one intriguing phrase at a time, as we have in the rest of the story, I am going to interpret the passage as a whole.

Jesus' prophecy is precipitated by the disciples commenting on the beautiful buildings and massive stones. Indeed, the temple in Jerusalem was an astounding place built by Herod the Great—grandfather of the Herod who killed John—who was the king of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth. He was a non-Jew who had usurped the Jewish throne by forcibly marrying into the Jewish royal family and then assassinating all of his in-laws. In an unsuccessful attempt to make himself popular, he undertook a massive renovation project on the temple which was still not quite complete by the time of this passage. Although Herod never gained the people's love, he did manage to build a marvelously impressive temple, of which even Herod's enemies were proud.

While the disciples notice the architectural wonder of the temple, Jesus focuses on its spiritual bankruptcy. Despite how impressive it appears, it is full of corruption, thievery, deception, and hypocrisy. Because of this spiritual bankruptcy, he has already predicted several times in the past several passages that the temple will not be allowed to stand for long:

- He cursed the barren fig tree as an example;
- He told the disciples that they could throw Mount Zion into the sea;
- And he told the story of the vineyard, in which the tenants would be destroyed and the vineyard given to others, among other things we haven't discussed.

Apparently, the disciples have not picked up on Jesus' hints about the future of the temple; so he says here in plain language, 'Not one stone will be left on another.' The disciples are astonished. They can't imagine that something so beautiful, and so strong, that's taken so long to build could be destroyed. They ask Jesus when and how such a thing could happen. In verse 30, Jesus answers them: it will happen before their generation dies out. In fact, the temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, less than 40 years later. Several of the disciples were alive to see it, and Mark is

probably writing during the war that leads up to the temple's destruction. Mark is watching this prophecy come true as he writes; thus the inserted warning, 'reader, pay attention!'

Besides wanting to know when it will happen, they want to know the sign that it is about to happen. They expect that some cataclysm will have to occur in order for the temple to be destroyed, and they want to be able to get out of the way. Jesus starts by discounting anything that they could possibly construe as a sign: not his return, not war, not earthquake, and not famine. They will see some of these things soon (and they will see people claiming to be him), but they aren't the sign that the temple will be destroyed. The temple may be safe during this time, but the disciples are not: they are going to face all sorts of persecution. Jesus doesn't want them to be surprised, and he wants them to know that the Holy Spirit will be with them.

The 'sacrilegious object' (v. 14) is the sign that the temple will be destroyed. Jesus is quoting Daniel 9: 27 here, and the sacrilegious object is some sort of blasphemy to the temple, perhaps referring to a Roman desecration of the temple and perhaps referring to a usurping high priest appointed around the time Mark is writing. We know this sacrilege is the sign, because while he has been saying 'don't panic,' after the sacrilege, Jesus says, 'Run!' We know he is still talking about the destruction of the temple because the events, though terrible, are local: only those in Judea need run, and if they run to the hills they will be safe.

What follows is a highly figurative, spiritual perspective on the destruction of the temple. The passages about the sky falling are quotes from the prophet Isaiah (13:10 and 34:4). Stars, sun, and moon are frequent prophetic images for earthly rulers and the spiritual power behind them. In this case, they refer to the priests and the Jewish council: when the temple is destroyed, their power will be destroyed. The Son of Man arriving on the clouds is a quotation from the prophet Daniel (7: 13-14), and it refers to the Son of Man ascending, not returning. He is coming before the Father to receive authority and dominion. Jesus said, earlier in Mark, that 'the stone rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone' (Psalm 110). Once the temple is destroyed, a new temple will be built on a new cornerstone—that is on him, who was rejected by the priests. In other words, as the temple is crashing down, both physically and spiritually, Jesus' church will be rising up. And the news is good news, not bad, because in this new era all the nations who were neglected by the temple leaders will be included.

The destruction of the temple will happen during the disciples' generation, and it is not the end of the world; in fact, it is just the beginning of their work. Whereas Jesus knows very particular signs for the destruction of the temple, even he does not know when the end of the world will be. What he does know is that his words last beyond the end of the world. If they keep alert and stay faithful to his words, the disciples too will outlast the temple, the persecutions they face, and even heaven and earth.

In this prophecy, Jesus is giving the disciples something strong to hold on to in the tough times that will follow his death and resurrection. When the disciples live through all of these events and see Jesus' words come true, they will indeed know that they are trustworthy. Jesus' words will prove to be far stronger than the massive stones of the temple. This demonstration will give them the assurance they need to remain faithful employees, doing his bidding and looking for him, until he comes again.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The disciples couldn't imagine anything more solid than the temple, but Jesus tells them that they will outlive it. What are the institutions you can't imagine failing? How would you respond if Jesus were to tell you that you will outlive the New York Stock Exchange, or Columbia University, or the United States? What would be your emotional response? How would it change your worldview? Although there are no specific prophecies about any of these institutions, the truth is that they are earthly things that will pass away. Jesus' words will outlast all of them. In what ways do you stake your life on human institutions lasting? What would it take for you to rely on Jesus' words instead? If you are ready to do so, spend some time today renouncing your reliance on these marvelous-looking human creations. Ask Jesus to give you his word and his Spirit instead.

- *For your six:* Are any of your six frightened by the earth-shaking events that are happening today? Ask Jesus to give them peace. Particularly pray that they would turn to Jesus in their fear.
- *For our church:* Pray that we would be a church who stays alert, watching and working for Jesus' return. Given recent events like last year's stock market plunge and economic meltdown, the earthquakes and destruction in Haiti, etc., our nation, city and neighborhood, all have been affected by the fragility of human institutions. Ask that God would help our community be a beacon of hope that spreads God's everlasting Kingdom and connects people with the trustworthy power of Jesus.

March 21

Mark 14: 1-11—A woman anoints Jesus

It was now two days before the Passover celebration and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The leading priests and the teachers of religious law were still looking for an opportunity to capture Jesus secretly and put him to death. ² "But not during the Passover," they agreed, "or there will be a riot." ³ Meanwhile, Jesus was in Bethany at the home of Simon, a man who had leprosy. During supper, a woman came in with a beautiful jar of expensive perfume. She broke the seal and poured the perfume over his head. ⁴ Some of those at the table were indignant. "Why was this expensive perfume wasted?" they asked. ⁵ "She could have sold it for a small fortune and given the money to the poor!" And they scolded her harshly. ⁶ But Jesus replied, "Leave her alone. Why berate her for doing such a good thing to me? ⁷ You will always have the poor among you, and you can help them whenever you want to. But I will not be here with you much longer. ⁸ She has done what she could and has anointed my body for burial ahead of time. ⁹ I assure you, wherever the Good News is preached throughout the world, this woman's deed will be talked about in her memory." ¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, went to the leading priests to arrange to betray Jesus to them. ¹¹ The leading priests were delighted when they heard why he had come, and they promised him a reward. So he began looking for the right time and place to betray Jesus.

Points of Interest:

- 'not during the Passover'—Jesus' words will outlast heaven and earth, but the leaders' words don't even outlast the day. They agree that they will not capture Jesus during the Passover, but the very same day they make arrangements for Jesus' capture with Judas. The Passover begins the next day.
- 'Why was this expensive perfume wasted?'—the woman gives lavishly to Jesus, but the others who see it call it 'a waste.' Essentially what they are saying is that Jesus is not worth the expense of this honor. They find the deed unworthy, because it is impractical. Jesus honors the woman for the deed, because it shows her deep love for him. Like the widow who gives everything she has in the offering, this woman pours out her whole bottle for Jesus. Therefore, Jesus puts her forward, just like he did the widow.
- 'You will always have the poor with you'—By saying this, Jesus is not minimizing service to the poor. In fact, he is quoting from Moses (Deuteronomy 15: 11), who goes on to say, 'That is why I am commanding you to share your resources freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need.' He is merely saying that there is no need to put this act of the woman's in competition with service to the poor. He may also be subtly suggesting that these people so quick to criticize the woman could instead actually give more to the poor.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Perhaps you've done something radical for Jesus. Perhaps you've given a large sum of money to someone because you felt like God was asking you to do so. Perhaps you've given up a high-paying job so that you could spend more time with your small group, or you've declined a promotion so that you could stay in Boston. Often, when we do such things, there are voices in our lives that say, 'What a waste!' They call us crazy, or criticize us, pointing out all of the good things you could have done with the extra resources we gave up. Jesus wants you to know that he sees and honors your choice. Receive Jesus' affirmation of you today.

- *For your six:* Judas reaches the end of his rope in this passage. Perhaps he is frustrated because Jesus honors the woman, or perhaps he can't handle Jesus talking about death anymore. Whatever the case, he seems to reject Jesus because he just won't be conventional. Perhaps your six also wish that Jesus would just be more 'normal.' Pray that God would protect your six from a spirit of Judas. Ask the Spirit to expand their ability to be surprised by Jesus.
- *For our church:* Pray that our church would be known for radical acts of devotion to Jesus.

March 22

Mark 14: 12-31—the last supper

¹² On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread (the day the Passover lambs were sacrificed), Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go to prepare the Passover supper?" ¹³ So Jesus sent two of them into Jerusalem to make the arrangements. "As you go into the city," he told them, "a man carrying a pitcher of water will meet you. Follow him. ¹⁴ At the house he enters, say to the owner, "The Teacher asks, Where is the guest room where I can eat the Passover meal with my disciples?" ¹⁵ He will take you upstairs to a large room that is already set up. That is the place; go ahead and prepare our supper there." ¹⁶ So the two disciples went on ahead into the city and found everything just as Jesus had said, and they prepared the Passover supper there. ¹⁷ In the evening Jesus arrived with the twelve disciples. ¹⁸ As they were sitting around the table eating, Jesus said, "The truth is, one of you will betray me, one of you who is here eating with me." ¹⁹ Greatly distressed, one by one they began to ask him, "I'm not the one, am I?" ²⁰ He replied, "It is one of you twelve, one who is eating with me now. ²¹ For I, the Son of Man, must die, as the Scriptures declared long ago. But how terrible it will be for my betrayer. Far better for him if he had never been born!" ²² As they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread and asked God's blessing on it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, "Take it, for this is my body." ²³ And he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. ²⁴ And he said to them, "This is my blood, poured out for many, sealing the covenant between God and his people. ²⁵ I solemnly declare that I will not drink wine again until that day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God." ²⁶ Then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷ "All of you will desert me," Jesus told them. "For the Scriptures say,

'God will strike the Shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.'

²⁸ But after I am raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there." ²⁹ Peter said to him, "Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will." ³⁰ "Peter," Jesus replied, "the truth is, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." ³¹ "No!" Peter insisted. "Not even if I have to die with you! I will never deny you!" And all the others vowed the same.

Points of Interest:

- 'found everything just as Jesus had said'—another small miracle of Jesus' provision for them, to prove the trustworthiness of his words.
- 'I'm not the one, am I?'—Each of the disciples seems more concerned that they not be the betrayer than they are at the fact that he will be betrayed. No wonder Jesus is so grateful for the woman from yesterday's passage; she is the one person who has paid any attention to what he is going through.
- 'he broke it in pieces'—Jesus breaks the loaf of bread to symbolize his broken body, and he pours the wine to symbolize his blood. In yesterday's passage, the woman broke the seal and poured the perfume. The woman's act of service was a sort of foreshadowing of Jesus' death. Just like this woman's act, his sacrifice will be called a waste. But just like he took her action as a good thing done for him, he knows his death will be a good thing done for us.
- 'the day the Passover lambs were sacrificed'—The center of the Passover meal was usually the lamb. The Passover meal commemorated the escape of the Israelites from Egypt, when the firstborn of all of Egypt were killed but the firstborn of all the Jews who sacrificed the lambs were saved. Jesus transfers the focus of the meal to the bread and wine, which symbolize his death. He is the new Passover lamb.

- ‘all of you will desert me’—Jesus tells them ahead of time that he knows they will desert him. He wants them to know that he knows they will fail, and yet he will not reject them: even though he knows they will desert him, he still wants to meet them in Galilee when he rises. His prediction increases the chances that they will not permanently lose heart when they fail.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Are you troubled over a way you have failed Jesus? Praise him for his mercy and patience. Turn back to him and remember his words, because he is waiting for you.
- *For your six:* Pray for the salvation of your six. Jesus broke his body and poured out his blood so that people could be saved. Pray that they will accept Jesus’ sacrifice for them.
- *For our church:* Pray for our times of communion. Pray even for this Sunday’s communion, that we would be aware of Jesus’ presence with us in a special way. Pray that God would give us special awareness of Jesus’ love for us and his sacrifice on our behalf.

March 23

Mark 14: 32-51—Jesus in the garden

³² And they came to an olive grove called Gethsemane, and Jesus said, “Sit here while I go and pray.” ³³ He took Peter, James, and John with him, and he began to be filled with horror and deep distress. ³⁴ He told them, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and watch with me.” ³⁵ He went on a little farther and fell face down on the ground. He prayed that, if it were possible, the awful hour awaiting him might pass him by. ³⁶ “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine.” ³⁷ Then he returned and found the disciples asleep. “Simon!” he said to Peter. “Are you asleep? Couldn’t you stay awake and watch with me even one hour? ³⁸ Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you. For though the spirit is willing enough, the body is weak.” ³⁹ Then Jesus left them again and prayed, repeating his pleadings. ⁴⁰ Again he returned to them and found them sleeping, for they just couldn’t keep their eyes open. And they didn’t know what to say. ⁴¹ When he returned to them the third time, he said, “Still sleeping? Still resting? Enough! The time has come. I, the Son of Man, am betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Up, let’s be going. See, my betrayer is here!” ⁴³ And immediately, as he said this, Judas, one of the twelve disciples, arrived with a mob that was armed with swords and clubs. They had been sent out by the leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the other leaders. ⁴⁴ Judas had given them a prearranged signal: “You will know which one to arrest when I go over and give him the kiss of greeting. Then you can take him away under guard.” ⁴⁵ As soon as they arrived, Judas walked up to Jesus. “Teacher!” he exclaimed, and gave him the kiss. ⁴⁶ Then the others grabbed Jesus and arrested him. ⁴⁷ But someone pulled out a sword and slashed off an ear of the high priest’s servant. ⁴⁸ Jesus asked them, “Am I some dangerous criminal, that you come armed with swords and clubs to arrest me? ⁴⁹ Why didn’t you arrest me in the Temple? I was there teaching every day. But these things are happening to fulfill what the Scriptures say about me.” ⁵⁰ Meanwhile, all his disciples deserted him and ran away. ⁵¹ There was a young man following along behind, clothed only in a linen nightshirt. When the mob tried to grab him, ⁵² they tore off his clothes, but he escaped and ran away naked.

Points of Interest:

- ‘My soul is crushed with grief’—Ever since Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah and Jesus predicted that he would suffer and die, Jesus has been calm, peaceful, purposeful, and in control in the face of the fact that he would be rejected and killed. In fact, he has deliberately and unhesitatingly made his way toward the place where he knows he will be killed. Here we see what empowers Jesus to have such resolve. We see him in a private moment, and in that private moment we see that he faces the same anguish we do: he doesn’t want to suffer, and he doesn’t want to die. But he takes his questions and his weakness to God in prayer. It is prayer which gives Jesus the strength he needs to do what the Father has called him to do.

- ‘Couldn’t you stay awake and watch with me even one hour?’—In an earlier passage, Jesus told them that they were to keep alert and watch until he comes again, but they don’t even have the strength to watch for one hour.
- ‘Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you’—Jesus is tempted to avoid his death, but prayer gives him the power to overcome temptation. Peter will soon face a temptation also: the temptation to deny Jesus. But rather than praying, he is sleeping. He won’t have the strength he needs to say no. Peter’s best intentions aren’t good enough: he needs the Holy Spirit to give his spirit power in prayer.
- ‘When he returned to them the third time’—Peter falls asleep three times. A foreshadowing of his three denials.
- ‘Am I some dangerous criminal?’—They have come to arrest Jesus, but they are the ones acting like criminals. They are lurking around, doing at night what they were afraid to do during the day when they might get caught.
- ‘all his disciples deserted him’—As if on cue, the disciples all run away when Jesus says that the Scriptures must be fulfilled: they are scattered just like the scripture Jesus quotes in yesterday’s passage says. They gave up everything to follow him, and now they are giving up everything to run away—one man even leaves behind his clothes.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* If we are really going to follow Jesus, we need the Holy Spirit’s power. Otherwise, the temptation to choose a safer route will overwhelm us. Pray that God would give your spirit the strength to overcome your weakness.
- *For your six:* The temple guards try to portray Jesus as a criminal, but the truth is clear that they were the ones who were acting dishonestly. Perhaps your six are being deceived by lies about Jesus: that he didn’t really exist, that he didn’t really say the things the Bible reports, that he is only a good moral teacher, etc. Pray that your six would be able to see through these lies.
- *For our church:* The disciples try to save themselves by scattering, every man for himself. That’s the worst thing to do: when the sheep scatter, they can be picked off one by one. Ask God to make us a church that sticks together, that stays close to one another and to Jesus in times of trouble. Pray that God would keep us all from the temptation to try to solve our problems ourselves. And ask him to make us able by his Spirit to support one another.