



# Faith Connections

Bible Study Guide

*Winter*  
**20**

*Profiles of God*

*Who Is Jesus?  
(The Gospel of Mark)*



# Bible Study Guide

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Winter 2020-21  
Volume 44, Number 2

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# Perspectives

## God Is . . .

In the 1950s, there was a television program entitled, “The Adventures of Superman.” The show centered, of course, on Superman. Each week, the program began by describing this superhero as being faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. These few descriptors were to be a window—a profile of sorts—into who Superman was and the power he possessed.

We often use one-word descriptors when identifying a noteworthy character trait in another. For example, “Jack is honest” or “Mary is kind.” This does not mean we think that this is their only character trait; it is only one of many attributes that help describe who they are. (Think about the words others would use to describe you.)

If you were to survey a typical congregation by asking each person to complete the sentence, “God is . . .,” the answers would be as varied as the people asked. You might hear one person say “God is holy,” while another might say “God is love.” Both would be right. God is holy . . . and is love . . . and is powerful . . . and is . . . Yet God cannot be defined by mere statements or phrases. However, His Word does give us a picture of who God is, what He does, and what His message is to humankind. The stories of Scripture help us understand God in a deeper way. The words used by people, and God himself, to describe God are a window into the character of God. For example, when God said, “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am *holy*, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own” (Leviticus 20:26, emphasis added), we can proclaim the truth that God is holy. When 1 John 4:8 says, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love,” we can proclaim the truth that God is love.

During this quarter, we will gain a clearer understanding of who God is by focusing on specific attributes. We will also examine the life of Jesus from the book of Mark, shedding light on the ways Jesus fulfills His role as Lord.

As you study each passage, consider what it says about who God is and the ways this truth impacts your life and the world in which you live.

May God bless you as you study His Word this quarter!

MIKE WONCH

Editor

December

6

# GOD IS FAITHFUL

*God is faithful in every generation and in all circumstances.*

## THE WORD

PSALM  
89:1-18

### KEY VERSE

**I will sing of the LORD's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.**

<sup>2</sup>I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.

<sup>3</sup>You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant,

<sup>4</sup>"I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations."

<sup>5</sup>The heavens praise your wonders, LORD, your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.

<sup>6</sup>For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD? Who is like the LORD among the heavenly beings?

<sup>7</sup>In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him.

<sup>8</sup>Who is like you, LORD God Almighty? You, LORD, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you.

<sup>9</sup>You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.

<sup>10</sup>You crushed Rahab like one of the slain; with your strong arm you scattered your enemies.

<sup>11</sup>The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it.

<sup>12</sup>You created the north and the south; Tabor and Hermon sing for joy at your name.

<sup>13</sup>Your arm is endowed with power; your hand is strong, your right hand exalted.

<sup>14</sup>Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.

<sup>15</sup>Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, LORD.

<sup>16</sup>They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness.

<sup>17</sup>For you are their glory and strength, and by your favor you exalt our horn.

<sup>18</sup>Indeed, our shield belongs to the LORD, our king to the Holy One of Israel.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

**G**od's faithfulness is a central theme in the Scripture. Psalm 89 addresses God's people in a time of captivity. It is a plea for God to protect David's kingship in a time of defeat for Judea.

### I WILL SING

#### Psalm 89:1-2

The psalmist writes, "I will sing of the LORD's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations" (v. 1). God is faithful because He loves us, and we must give voice to God's love. We know that God loves us because throughout our life He guides, provides, and protects us. That is why our Christian life provides a platform to speak hope in a broken world. We can do this because God will always be faithful.

The psalmist affirms that God's love stands firm. Too often love is understood as a response to someone. The psalmist is clear that God's love is forever. That means that God's love has no beginning and no end. The understanding that God has established His faithfulness in heaven reinforces the power of His love.

The first two verses of this great psalm introduce God's faithful love. The "forever" love testifies to the character of God. In practical terms, this means nothing we will ever do can possibly change the enduring faithfulness of God. While this does not diminish our

### Did You Know?

“Rahab” refers to an evil force lodged against creation. It can be a metaphor for Egypt, but not here. The image shows up in some ancient creation myths as a threat of defeat. The term calls to mind a dragon. This image suggests the impotence of evil in the presence of God.

## GOD OF COVENANT

## MIGHTY GOD

responsibility to obey God, it reminds us that our obedience is not the reason God loves us. God loves first and on that foundation we serve Him.

### Psalm 89:3-4

One clear evidence of God’s faithfulness is the covenant made with David. The kingship of David, and thus the line to the Messiah, is crucial to the faith of God’s people. The psalmist recalls the covenant made with David. In the Scripture, this covenant reveals the promise of God for redemption. This promise established a “line forever.” It means that whatever happened to the King of Judea will not change the promise made by God. The psalmist writes, “I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations” (89:4). There is no “if” in this verse. Because God has a purpose, His faithfulness endures. The covenant reminds God’s people of His unwavering promise in the face of the unpredictability of life. The history of Israel bears out the fact that disobedience leads to suffering, but it never changed God’s faithful promise.

### Psalm 89:5-13

The psalmist asks a probing question, “Who is like you, LORD God Almighty?” (89:8a). The images that follow establish the breadth and depth of God’s might. The psalmist demonstrates the awesome power of God in creation. The “assembly of the holy ones” (89:5) introduces an image of those surrounding the throne of God in heaven—the angels. God rules on earth (the surging sea submits to the authority of God, v. 9) and in heaven. God crushes all of His enemies including Rahab, an image of death and evil. All that we see on earth exists under the creative power of God. In fact, God created the north and the south.

Tabor and Hermon refer to the origin of the Northern Kingdom. This image reminds the reader of the massive extent of God’s reach. The power of God

## Think About It

The Hebrew word for faithfulness (v. 1, 2, 4, 8) is *emunah*. This word stresses God's reliability. It connotes stability and firmness in something or someone who can be trusted. However, when referring to God, the word conveys the idea that His actions reflect His own character, which is stable and consistent.

## FAITHFUL GOD

established the world and nothing compares to Him. We should remember that the God of creation established the covenant with David. God's power and love converge in His faithfulness. The God of creation and covenant is, and continuously remains, faithful.

### Psalm 89:14-18

The psalmist points out that God's "righteousness and justice are the foundation" of His throne and God's "love and faithfulness" go before Him (89:14). The faithfulness grounds itself in righteousness and justice. Verse 14 brings the key ideas together: righteousness, justice, love, and faithfulness. It is important to understand that God's power arise out of His nature. Since God's faithfulness unfolds eternally in all of His interactions with creation, it testifies to His character.

The psalmist writes, "Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, LORD" (89:15). Walking in the knowledge of God's faithfulness give cause for celebration. The psalmist declares that those who "walk in the light" of God's presence see the "glory and strength" of God. Whatever circumstance defines life, according to the psalmist "our shield belongs to the LORD" (v. 18).

Psalm 89 strongly endorses the kingship of David as a symbol of the covenant. What God has done in the past gives us the assurance of what we can expect in the future. We can live in the confidence that God's faithfulness is revealed in His consistency and in the fulfillment of His promises.

## REFLECT

What difference would understanding the faithfulness of God mean for comprehending the assurance of our salvation?

HENRY SPAULDING, II is president of Mount Vernon Nazarene University.

December

13

# GOD IS GRACIOUS

*God's grace and compassion are unlimited  
and focused on us.*

## THE WORD

PSALM  
103:8-18

### KEY VERSE

**T**he LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger,  
abounding in love.

<sup>9</sup>He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;  
<sup>10</sup>he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according  
to our iniquities.

<sup>11</sup>For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his  
love for those who fear him;

<sup>12</sup>as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our  
transgressions from us.

<sup>13</sup>As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has  
compassion on those who fear him;

<sup>14</sup>for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are  
dust.

<sup>15</sup>The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the  
field;

<sup>16</sup>the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers  
it no more.

<sup>17</sup>But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those  
who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children—

<sup>18</sup>with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his  
precepts.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

**P**salm 103 provides a comprehensive statement on the wideness of God's grace and forgiveness. Perhaps no message is more relevant than the simple, yet profound truth that God is gracious. Grace is not an aspect of the divine, it is God.

The image of God's grace reflects on the second giving of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 32—34). God gave the commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. While waiting on Moses to descend from the mountain, the children of God actually built a golden calf out of fear and anxiety. This sinful act might justify God turning His back on those He delivered from Egypt. Psalm 103 offers a theological reflection on why this did not happen. Seeing this, Moses threw down the tablets containing the law in a moment of justified anger. Yet in God's great mercy, He gave the law to Moses a second time. Psalm 103 reflects on the unbounded grace of God in this moment against the backdrop of human frailty and sin. This provides an essential layer of meaning for comprehending the grace of God. The message of Psalm 103 reminds us that God's love and grace reach us in our weakness and failure.

### GOD OF COMPASSION AND GRACE

#### **Psalm 103:8-14**

Scripture abounds with stories of the compassion and graciousness of God. The psalmist writes, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love" (v. 8). The narrative of the second giving of the law is just one reminder that God loves us through His holiness. God's love does not reflect our good deeds. Rather, it reminds us of the holy love of God. While we may think that God is waiting for us to fail, the Scripture tells another story. God "will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever" (v. 9). In fact, God "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (v. 10). I have spent my entire adult life in Nazarene colleges/universities working with emerging

## Did You Know?

The New Testament echoes the themes found in Psalm 103. The meaning of Christ reflects and deepens the emphasis upon the extent of God's compassion. The act of forgiveness that stands at the center of Psalm 103 finds fulfillment in the self-giving love of Jesus Christ.

adults. My pastoral work has confirmed this same reality of those in the church. Part of my (our) work is to help our students understand that God's love is not conditional. God's grace is the unmerited love shed upon the lives of those who do not deserve it. All people in every circumstance enjoy the lavish grace of God.

The psalmist writes, "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (vv. 11-12). Science and technology provide an even more vivid image of this verse. No matter how large the universe is, God's grace reaches beyond it. There is no limit to the reach of God's grace.

The love of a parent provides a vivid picture of God's grace. Such love is nearly universal. A baby is dependent upon the love of a parent or caregiver as he/she matures. The psalmist writes, "For he [God] knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (v. 14). God loved us when we were dust and we are dependent upon Him for every breathe we take.

## EVERLASTING GOD

### Psalm 103:15-18

God is without limit, but mortals are "like grass." The eternal God everlastingly gives life to those caught in sin. The psalmist writes, "The life of mortals is like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more" (vv. 15-16). Even in the midst of a world that rises and falls, the hope of redemption provides a future. The psalmist announces that grace reaches the world in its fragility.

Contrasted with the limits of life, the everlasting love of God is available to those who fear Him. Obeying the covenant opens the fullness of God's grace. The reality of grace reaches humankind and establishes us through our obedience. We need to notice that obedience follows grace. Our tendency might be to find assurance through the quality of our life. It is

**Think About It**

Our lived-out grace toward others is not rooted in our grace, dependent on our personal graciousness. It is God's grace at work in us that enables us to be gracious.

always easier to “deserve” our place at the table. The narrative of the Scripture reminds us that God invites us to the table for no other reason than the love of our creator. Life in God will always be a gift.

Psalm 103 reminds us that grace arises from the nature of God and becomes evident through divine action. God creates the world as an act of His love. Simply put, there is something because God's love and mercy calls existence into being. Creation grace expresses the concrete reality of existence. Dust takes form through grace.

The Christian faith affirms that through the disobedience of one, all creation suffers (Romans 5:12). Yet, the sacrificial love of Jesus opens the way to life in the midst of human failure. The prevenient grace of God affirms the fact that God everlastingly offers light. Grace redeems life—justification. The promise of redemption provides power to live a faithful/obedient life—sanctification. Ultimately, grace perfects our love by excluding all lesser loves. We are able to keep God's commandments through grace. The psalmist offers a powerful definition of grace, “He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities” (v. 10).

**GRACE TOWARDS OTHERS**

We have peered through the window of Psalm 103 into the character of God. We have discovered the door into a new way of grace-filled living. Our lived-out grace toward others is not rooted in our own grace; it is God's grace at work in us that enables us to be gracious. All our efforts as Christians are based first and foremost on the grace of God. The call to live graciously with others is not bondage. It is grace-empowered living.

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**REFLECT** **H**ow does grace change the trajectory of obedience and redemption?

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HENRY SPAULDING, II

December

20

# GOD IS LOVE

*Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of God's attribute of love.*

## THE WORD

1 JOHN  
4:7-21

### KEY VERSE

**D**ear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup>**This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.** <sup>10</sup>This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

<sup>13</sup>This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup>And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup>If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. <sup>16</sup>And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. <sup>17</sup>This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. <sup>18</sup>There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

<sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup>And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

Love is a universal need. A baby in the hospital yearns for human touch. No matter our age the desire to feel loved remains. Our son turned back every day just as he entered elementary school with a slight smile and a quick wave. He expressed both his need for love and his affection for his mother. This bond sustained him, even when he was away working on his doctoral degree. This simple fact energizes and guides life.

This passage reminds the reader that love comes from God. When we love, we seek the good of the other person before our own. We are able to do this because God loves us first. This passage spells out the origin and implications of love.

### GOD'S LOVE

#### 1 John 4:7-10

We read, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (v. 7). The link between the love of God for us and our regard for the other shines through this verse. Our relationship with God inspires and empowers love for the other. Knowing God spills out into the world from those who have a saving relationship with God. Wherever we find compassion, the fingerprints of God are exposed. The opposite is also true. The absence of love reveals a lack in our relationship with God.

Jesus is the evidence of the depth and breadth of God's love for us. The Christian faith affirms that Christ is at the center for understanding God and loving others. God reached through time to touch human life. Accordingly, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (v. 10). We do not search for God, He sent His Son to redeem us. Atonement is the act of God to deliver humanity from the grip of sin. This is exactly what love looks like—sacrifice for us.

## Did You Know?

John Wesley considered verse 19 to be the sum of all religion. The love of the Father makes it possible to love our brothers and sisters.

### LOVE TOWARD OTHERS

### THE TRINITY

### UNDERSTANDING GOD'S LOVE

#### 1 John 4:11-12

The love of God compels us to reach toward the other. According to this passage, loving one another happens as God lives in us. Our Heavenly Father intends for humanity to become complete through loving action. John is not writing about a theory, but a concrete practice.

Love is not about a warm feeling. It is about the hard work of finding fullness in God, as we become the agents of His work in the world. Too often, love is a nice word that carries little meaning. As the church, we are called to embody love as we dare to touch the pain of those around us with redeeming love.

#### 1 John 4:13-16

This amazing passage affirms the Trinity. The Holy Spirit reveals that the Father “sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (4:14b). The Father, Son, and Spirit are at work in the world through the obedience of the redeemed. We live in God’s love. Love is just this simple and just this profound. Lengthy books reflect on this topic, but it finally comes down to God loving us so that we might love others. God’s love touches the world through the hands and feet of Christians.

John writes, “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them” (v. 16b). Any attempt to separate our relationship with God and the presence of love in the world is futile. One of the most fascinating dimensions of this passage is the early emergence of understanding the dynamic life of God as love. The Father speaks the Son and the Spirit returns that Word in everlasting praise. The Triune fellowship expresses the eternal embrace of divine love. Moreover, the abundance of God spills over into the world as Christ-formed love. This is the beauty of John’s word.

#### 1 John 4:17-21

Understanding the love of God brings confidence for those who follow Him. It is easy to think that God’s

**Think About It**

Because love is fulfilled in relationships, God's love not only transforms His relationship with us but also transforms our relationships with others.

love for us is dependent upon our perfection. Love is not a reward for righteousness, it is the source of it. The pointless attempt to justify ourselves with good works is not necessary. Justice and compassion flow effortlessly into all of our relationships through the love of God working in our lives empowered by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Good deeds will never equal salvation. The capacity of love depends upon the work of God. Inherent goodness will not prevail, but the love of God expressed through us brings peace. Goodness/holiness follow the abundant love of God.

This passage ends with an expression of the incompatibility of love and hate. Simply put, if we say we love God, it is not possible to hate our brother or sister. John writes, "Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister" (v. 21b). This means that loving God always means to seek the best for our brother and sister. Bitterness and strife betray the gospel of compelling love. We cannot make God not love us, but hatred hides that love from the world. God is not interested in our theology so much as our embodiment of His love.

Today's passage helps us to understand that we express our faith with a persistent love for others. Our capacity to love and be loved is based solely on God's prevenient love for us, and that love finds its best expression in Jesus Christ. Those who are in Christ are free to love and be loved.

---

**REFLECT** **W**hat does it mean to love others with a godly love?

---

HENRY SPAULDING, II

December

27

# GOD IS POWER

*God uses His sovereign power to accomplish His will, but that will is caring and providential.*

## THE WORD

**PSALM**  
**147:1-11**

**P**raise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!

<sup>2</sup>The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel.

<sup>3</sup>He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

<sup>4</sup>He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.

### KEY VERSE

<sup>5</sup>**Great is our LORD and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.**

<sup>6</sup>The LORD sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.

<sup>7</sup>Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp.

<sup>8</sup>He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills.

<sup>9</sup>He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call.

<sup>10</sup>His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;

<sup>11</sup>the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

**P**ower is the capacity to do what one intends. How one uses that power determines character. Human power has limits and it is important to come to grips with this fact. This psalm reminds us that God's power

is without limit, but also that He “delights in those who fear him.” This passage expounds on the power, governance, and wisdom of God. The psalmist reflects on a restored Jerusalem and the care of God for His people.

## PRAISING GOD

### Psalm 147:1-6

The psalm begins by reminding the reader that it is good to praise God. Actually, praising God enriches life. The first verse reminds us that it is pleasant to praise God for who He is and the many benefits He brings to us. When we praise God, it predisposes us to see His hand at work in history. When we praise God, it helps us remember His providence. While it is possible to tell history apart from acknowledging God, such an account would be shallow.

Jerusalem is not the work of crafty politicians. Jerusalem was always a gift of God to His people. Keep in mind that God can do anything that His nature allows—using His power to heal the brokenhearted and bind the wounds of the hurting. While it might be tempting to congratulate ourselves for all we have done, it is fitting to see and acknowledge God’s hand at work. Giving recognition to the power of God evokes praise for His many acts of grace.

God is concerned to use His power to help the hurting and wounded (v. 3). His power is exercised to heal and nurture. God acts on behalf of those who are limited in their ability to act for themselves.

The wisdom of God is fully displayed through His compassion. The psalmist writes, “He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name” (v. 4). Not only does God “determine,” He knows His creation intimately. This combination of creative power and intimate knowledge defines the nature of God. The history of God’s people reminds the reader of His providence and compassion.

The key verse in this passage reads, “Great is our LORD and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit” (v. 5). Scripture reminds us from Genesis to

## Did You Know?

This passage is part of a collection of five “hallelujah psalms” that conclude the book. This group of psalms would have functioned like hymns for the congregation. The underlying theme of Psalm 147 is the power of God in creation and governance of the world.

## HUMILITY

Revelation that God is powerful. He speaks the world into existence. He delivers His people from Egypt and provides light and manna for the journey. God disciplines the disobedience of His people, but He brings the exiles home. All of this and more is true, but the understanding of God knows no limit. The very concept of limitlessness is difficult to fathom. Life is often perplexing because our understanding is limited. We pray to our heavenly Father in our confusion because we know that His understanding knows no limit. We believe with the psalmist that God acts on our behalf. The psalmist stands amazed by the power and understanding of God in light of the history of Jerusalem.

### Psalm 147:7-11

The power of God is evident through His care for the humble. Humility is the hallmark of faith. An honest appraisal of life displays the hand of God and our inability to control events. Reading Psalm 147 reminds us that humility opens the way to gratitude for the power of God. The humble heart realizes the providence of God. Psalm 147:7 reads, “Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp.” Comprehending the power of God allows God’s people to hope. The twin sins of presumption and despair hide the gracious power of God. Despair surrenders life to a posture of resignation. Life becomes an unending litany of disappointment and frustration. There is no room for God in this picture of life. On the other side of despair is presumption. Here, the story is that God will bless us no matter what we do or say. God called us and that is that. This was the sin of some in Israel before captivity. The people presumed on the grace of God and rendered the need to obey unimportant. Ultimately, this is not an act of faith because it ignored the necessity of obedience. Gratitude arises from a clear-headed acknowledgement of God’s holy intentions for His people and not from despair or presumption.

The power of God comes into view as we consider

**Think About It**

This is my Father's world,  
 And to my list'ning ears  
 All nature sings,  
 and round me rings  
 The music of the spheres.  
 This is my Father's world.  
 O let me ne'er forget  
 That tho' the wrong seems oft  
 so strong,  
 God is the Ruler yet.

—*This is My Father's World*. Words by Maltbie D. Babcock.

**BE ENCOURAGED**

the clouds, rain, and grass on the hills. God provides. He has the power and will to provide. Yet, God finds His deepest pleasure in “those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love” (147:11b). Hope is an act of faith in a God who sustains the humble, cares for the earth, and provides food for the cattle according to the psalmist. The power and love of God unfolded in Jesus Christ, who alone can provide for our salvation. Our hope is in a God who honors the humble and provides life for the dying. The words of the psalmist ring true—“Praise the Lord.”

Because of God's sovereign power, we should live humbly and confidently. God's providential power humbles our presumption of lordship. Our feeble attempts to control and direct our world are revealed for what they are: human folly. Nevertheless, we can live with confidence. Our assurance rests no longer in ourselves but in the faithful sovereignty of God.

We should be encouraged. The Creator of the universe cares for us. When things seem hopeless, we have a caring and powerful advocate. When we experience pain, we can trust in God's providential power. When things seem senseless and unfair, we can trust in God's absolute wisdom and understanding. In every experience, God is still graciously working on our behalf.

The Psalms are prayers uttered to God. One might even consider the book of Psalms a prayer book. This should remind us that in the midst of our confusion and life's perplexities, we can pray to a God of power and compassion. When we pray, we do so as a practice of hope in a God of power and wisdom.

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**REFLECT** **W**hat would our prayer life look like if we truly believed that God's wisdom and power were limitless?

January

3

# GOD IS HOLY

*God's attribute of holiness is central to who He is, but this attribute is also central to the Christian life as we reflect God's holiness.*

## THE WORD

1 PETER  
1:13-25

### KEY VERSE

**T**herefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. <sup>14</sup>As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. <sup>15</sup>**But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;** <sup>16</sup>for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

<sup>17</sup>Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. <sup>18</sup>For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, <sup>19</sup>but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. <sup>20</sup>He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

<sup>21</sup>Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

<sup>22</sup>Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. <sup>23</sup>For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. <sup>24</sup>For, “All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall,

<sup>25</sup>but the word of the Lord endures forever.” And this is the word that was preached to you.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

**M**any years ago in my first pastorate, a young woman who attended my church called in the early evening in a panic. She had gone to Bible study and read about sanctification and holiness and it frightened her. What did this suggest about her relationship with God? How could she know that she was a child of God? She could hardly talk through her tears. Because she was relatively new to the church, the idea of a deeper work of God in her life was difficult to understand. I explained that her walk with God needed to go deeper. We talked about God's extreme love for her. We talked about breaking the power of sin. She began to understand that holiness was about a fuller and more intimate relationship with God. We talked for about an hour and her tears of confusion gave way to peace in her heart.

This passage lays the foundation for understanding the holiness of God and the corresponding call for human beings to be holy.

### ALERT AND PRESENT **1 Peter 1:13-16**

The Christian life requires that we be alert and present. Peter calls on his readers to “set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming” (v. 13). This should remind us that faith is not only a gift of God, but also a conviction that we must embrace. The link between the full revelation of Jesus and our present striving to live is a clear indication that obtaining holiness is a gracious achievement. This lifestyle is about avoiding the pitfalls of secular culture and choosing by the grace of God the transformation possible through Jesus Christ.

Evil desires are those that lead us to accept the path of sin instead of the blessings of holiness. Ignorance is the symbol for a disengaged and sinful life. The writer urges the reader to be obedient, alert, and engaged children as they embrace holiness. The foundation of the Christian life is holiness. It is important to note that

## Did You Know?

Holy living is an essential element of many religions around the world. Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), an important theologian, wrote *The Idea of the Holy*. He developed the thesis in this volume that essentially “tremendous mystery” informs religion and life. Peter understands that this mystery is defined by awe and love.

## HERE AND NOW

## BELIEVING, OBEYING, AND LOVING

holiness is not an ideal, but a realization of the nature of God. Because God is holy, we not only understand what sanctity looks like, we see it in Jesus. God’s desire is that we be like Him—holy.

God is wholly different, but He is present. There is no contradiction between radical holiness and human life. We know this through the incarnation. Jesus was fully God and fully human so that we can be fully human and holy—being Christlike. The call to embrace holiness emerges from the very nature of God. Because God is holy, He calls us to be holy through the power of the Holy Spirit.

### 1 Peter 1:17-21

Peter urges, “live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear” (v. 17b). This reminds the reader of two important truths. First, God calls us to live here and now. Holiness engages life. Second, we live “for now” as citizens of another kingdom. Believers are resident “foreigners.” Here, the writer contrasts the emptiness of the way of life inherited from our ancestors with the gift of the “precious blood of Christ.” Jesus was “chosen before the creation of the world” and in these last times revealed the holiness of God. The Son of God incarnate in time is the key to believing in God. It is through Jesus that we are able to place our hope in God. The holiness of God comes clearly into view because Jesus is without blemish or lured by the temptations of the world.

### 1 Peter 1:22-25

Purification comes through obedience to the truth found in Jesus Christ. One of the marks of holiness is the capacity to love one another. Jesus models this love by redeeming us. The connection between love of God and love of neighbor defines holiness in practical terms. Obedience also connects Peter’s admonition to have alert minds. Therefore, a key element of holiness comes into view—believing, obeying, and loving. This theme exists throughout the Scripture.

## Think About It

God's attribute of holiness is central to who He is. It is also central to the Christian life as we reflect God's character in who we are.

Peter affirms, "For you have been born again" (v. 23). This reminds the reader that holiness is not about the slavish human striving to be good or moral. Rather, it is about a genuine transformation in the heart through faith. Holiness is not a coat of righteousness; it is a fundamental change in our heart. To be sure, holiness requires our response (obedience), but it is not a human achievement. Holiness represents the cooperation between the grace of God and our deliberate intention to be like Christ through the Spirit.

Peter reminds us that, "All people are like grass" (v. 24a). The world is passing away along with everything in it. John Wesley observes, "Every human creature is transient and withering as grass" (Notes on the NT, 876). Death is a reality for life, but by the grace of God the enduring word touches our life. This closing thought in this passage reminds us that holiness depends upon God. Therefore, we will endure through the graciousness of God.

## HOLINESS FOREVERMORE

The old song "Holiness Forevermore" declares, "There's a blessed triumphant song: Holiness forevermore!" (*Sing to the Lord*, 502). Let's put the issue of holiness in perspective. Holiness is not a secondary issue, nor a temporary one. Our call to holiness is central because it essentially expresses who God is and what He calls us to be. It is a matter rooted in the deep character of God. It is an issue at the heart of His purpose for us. To be like Him is to reflect His holiness.

## REFLECT

Consider practical ways of living out what it means to be holy in your world.

HENRY SPAULDING, II

January

10

# THE LORD OF NEW BEGINNINGS

*The coming of Jesus marked an absolute new beginning of salvation history in which we are invited to participate.*

## THE WORD

MARK  
1:1-20

**T**he beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, <sup>2</sup>as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”—

<sup>3</sup>“a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

<sup>4</sup>And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup>John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup>I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup>At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

<sup>12</sup>At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, <sup>13</sup>and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

<sup>14</sup>After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup>**“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”**

## KEY VERSE

<sup>16</sup>As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.<sup>17</sup>“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.”<sup>18</sup>At once they left their nets and followed him.

<sup>19</sup>When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets.<sup>20</sup>Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

Even though it is the shortest of the Gospels, the book of Mark offers us a tightly-focused perspective on the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Typically regarded as the earliest written gospel, Mark is a fast-moving, action-packed narrative focusing ultimately on Jesus’ supernatural nature as the crucified and risen Messiah, the Son of God.

## PROLOGUE

### Mark 1:1-8

With the same anticipation that students feel when diving in to a standardized test after the hand on the classroom clock reaches “12” and their proctor says, “Begin . . .,” Mark introduces his gospel with an immediacy about Jesus’ ministry that invites readers directly in to the fray.

Mark initiates his gospel by saying, “The beginning of the *good news* about Jesus the *Messiah*” (v. 1, emphasis added). With these ten words, Mark frames who Jesus is by offering great news, both through the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, as well as first-century impact. Mark starts immediately with Jesus as the Messiah, who is the beginning of the best news possible.

Mark grounds his opening by melding the prophecies of Isaiah 40 with the message of John the Baptist, who embodies the one paving the way for the Messiah. A colorful character with a voice thundering in the desert, John calls everyone within earshot to prepare themselves for Israel’s long-awaited Savior through a life-change marked by repentance and baptism.

## Did You Know?

Nazareth was long-regarded as a backwater village. Often viewed as an insignificant hamlet in the hills of Galilee, it served as Jesus' hometown after He, Mary, and Joseph returned from their Egyptian exile (Luke 2:39). The village's perceived insignificance is epitomized in Nathanael's sharp response when he heard Philip declare that Jesus the Nazarene was the Messiah: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46). Early leaders in the holiness movement identified their ministries to the poor, widowed, addicted, and orphaned with Jesus the Nazarene and His "toiling, lowly mission" (Smith, 111).

## GOOD NEWS TRAVELS FAST

Despite his wild diet and appearance, John the Baptist calls upon the throngs in the wilderness to recognize that his message was only an "appetizer" for what the Messiah would soon serve up. John saw himself as a mere stagehand in comparison to the One who was about to enter the stage to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

## SUDDEN ARRIVAL

### Mark 1:9-11

As is often the case, God frequently comes to us in the most unexpected times and ways. In Mark 1:9, we can imagine the heat vapors roiling up from the scorched ground as the crowd seems to divide spontaneously and Jesus strides up to John wading in his watery pulpit in the Jordan.

Mark indicates in 1:5 that the crowds gathering to hear John came from the Judean countryside and even as far as Jerusalem. Jesus found John after journeying from His home in the Galilean hill country of Nazareth, more than a 60-mile trek as the crow flies.

Mark's gospel is known for its sense of urgency. In just 16 chapters, words like "directly," "soon," and "immediately" are peppered more than 20 times throughout Mark's narrative. A careful reader can often journey through the book of Mark feeling like Jesus is dashing from one incident immediately to the next.

In Mark, the details of Jesus' baptism are summed up in just three verses (1:9-11). As soon as Jesus comes up from the water, Mark records His baptism in ways that serve as an anointing for His messianic ministry to come. Mark chronicles the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove, accompanied by an affirmation from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (v. 11).

### Mark 1:12-20

Following Mark's conventional storytelling model, we're not surprised to find Jesus heading immediately

**Think About It**

Kingdom means “reign” or “rule,” so the kingdom of God means God’s kingly rule or reign. When Jesus said, “The rule of God is at hand,” He meant something like this: The eternal God, who is and always will be sovereign Lord, is now breaking into the history of the world for the salvation of humankind. God is visiting His people to redeem them. And this is happening, being inaugurated, in the coming of Jesus, the Son of God and Messiah.

into the wilderness following His baptism. Led by the Spirit and attended to by God’s messengers for 40 days, Jesus overcomes the tests of both wild creatures and country.

Unfortunately, the good news that John declared from the Jordan was not well-received by all who heard it. We learn quickly that the Baptist has been imprisoned. Now John’s message is personified in Jesus through a great, timely announcement: “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (v.15).

If you’re looking for some great news these days, Jesus’ ministry is marked by a kingdom that comes near, even right to where we find ourselves today. Proclaiming throughout Galilee and even along the Sea of Galilee in 1:14-20, Jesus’ kingdom beckons us to follow this Messiah who comes near, and to shape our everyday lives in light of this great news.

As we tune our ears to the voice of the Spirit, may we too join countless others in responding to these new beginnings immediately, and without delay.

**REFERENCES:**

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**REFLECT**

**T**his week, pray the Lord’s Prayer from Matthew 6:9b-13 daily. Link together “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” without any pause and as one continuous phrase. How does this change in phrasing shape your expectation of the coming of God’s kingdom?

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January

17

# THE LORD OF TRUTH

*Through His teaching ministry, Jesus illustrated the ultimate truths of the gospel.*

## THE WORD

MARK  
4:21-34

### KEY VERSE

**H**e said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? **22For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.** <sup>23</sup>If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”

<sup>24</sup>“Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. <sup>25</sup>Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

<sup>26</sup>He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup>Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup>All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. <sup>29</sup>As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

<sup>30</sup>Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup>It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. <sup>32</sup>Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

<sup>33</sup>With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. <sup>34</sup>He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

Jesus' parables first seemed like familiar territory, filled with rich, concrete object lessons from everyday life. But after taking them seriously and wrestling deeply with them over time, parables can be confounding. Jesus' parables often seem to be constructed with trapdoors that take us to places we never imagined. At times, we can feel like they leave us with more questions than answers.

### THE BIGGER PICTURE **Mark 4:21-25**

In the same way that a property's value often hinges on location, location, location, our interpretation of Scripture is linked to context, context, context. It can be very dangerous to pluck one verse out of the Bible without understanding what's happening before and after a particular passage. Today's text is preceded by the early stages of Jesus' ministry, including His growing crowd of followers and the calling of His disciples. Immediately preceding today's passage, Jesus shares a parable about a farmer sowing seed in various types of soil. Following His seed-sowing parable, Jesus launches into three additional parables about the nature of the kingdom of God and what it means to be on the inside track as a disciple of Jesus.

Given the context, verse 21 seems to indicate that Jesus shares these parables with His disciples in a more private setting (4:10). After offering additional insights into His teaching on soils and seed sowing (4:13-20), Jesus calls on His disciples to carefully discern His teaching, and in the same way that a person puts an oil lamp on a stand to illuminate a room, Jesus encourages His disciples to bring His teaching into the full light of day and to pass on His message to everyone with eyes to see and ears to hear it.

### SEEDS OF KNOWLEDGE

#### **Mark 4:26-32**

In the next seven verses, Jesus returns to the narrative setting that marked the beginning of this

## Did You Know?

The Greek word for “parable” literally means “to toss alongside,” calling for the reader or hearer to make a comparison between two separate things. Jesus’ use of parables aims at our personal faith development by using metaphors to draw comparisons for the purpose of deepening our faith and character.

chapter: two back-to-back parables related to seeds and growth.

In 4:26-29, Jesus likens the kingdom of God to someone who casts seed on the ground but then leaves it to grow. The sower scatters seed and then goes about his life day after day. Not dependent on the sower for success, the seed germinates, grows, and ripens until the reapers come to bring in the harvest.

Finally, Jesus adds an additional parable about a specific seed: mustard. Here, Jesus compares mustard’s exponential growth from a small seed to a robust shrub with branches large enough to shade the birds who perch within.

Perhaps the message of this mustard parable is more widely recognized in areas where invasive species thrive. Nearly 150 years ago, Kudzu was introduced to reduce soil erosion in Pennsylvania. Yet within a generation, this vine spread as much as a foot per day across the American south. Today, Kudzu is extensively reported in half the continental United States. It is especially prevalent in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, overtaking nearly everything in its path. From California to British Columbia, Scotch broom is another prevalent, noxious weed. Known for its bright yellow blossoms in the spring, Scotch broom infestations form dense stands that crowd out native species and destroy wildlife habitat, and can wreak havoc on the sinuses of those with allergies.

Here in Mark 4:30-32, Jesus conveys to His disciples the exponential growth of God’s coming kingdom. To borrow a modern phrase, the kingdom of God can “spread like a weed” even apart from our efforts and ingenuity, thriving in places we cannot begin to imagine or control.

## UNTYING THE KNOTS

### Mark 4:33-34

Jesus recognized the power of parables and used them widely in His public teaching ministry. Unlike fables, which can be easily distilled into the moral of

### Think About It

While we're often inclined to pray for clarity and assurance, the nature of faith offers little of this. Instead, faith calls for trust, especially when the evidence around us is scant.

a story, parables are not readily domesticated. In a literary—and perhaps literal—sense, parables are not readily tamed.

The gospels indicate that Jesus used parables to teach the crowds in indirect ways, often instilling a thirst within them for more exploration. He also employed parables with the disciples, using them as a springboard for deeper engagement. In Mark's gospel, Jesus' use of parables at this point in His ministry ensured that only His closest followers could recognize the heart of God's kingdom, while leaving the possibility of some limited understanding for others as they were able to hear (4:33). In addition to His use of parables with both the crowds and disciples, Jesus engaged in more personal dialogue with The Twelve where "he explained everything" (4:34b).

### THE LORD OF TRUTH

What Jesus taught mattered for the eternal destiny of those who heard Him teach and for us. Jesus taught as the Lord of truth. The power of His truth means that it will ultimately triumph. The temptation we struggle with is to despair that truth will ever triumph. We see obstacles; we recognize the power of evil; we fear that nothing will ever change for the better. But God's truth triumphs. Jesus made this point through His parable of the mustard seed. The parable contrasts a small beginning with a great outcome, but Jesus clearly identifies the kingdom as that which begins small and culminates in a great ending.

### REFLECT

Parables "stir the pot" by inviting us to engage in feedback, dialogue, and response. Spend some time this week wrestling with a different parable each day from this week's text.

JAY RICHARD AKKERMAN

January

24

# THE LORD OF LIFE

*God is the source of true health and life.*

## THE WORD

**MARK**  
**5:21-43**

**W**hen Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. <sup>22</sup>Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. <sup>23</sup>He pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.” <sup>24</sup>So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. <sup>25</sup>And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. <sup>26</sup>She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. <sup>27</sup>When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup>because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” <sup>29</sup>Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

<sup>30</sup>At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?”

<sup>31</sup>“You see the people crowding against you,” his disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’”

<sup>32</sup>But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup>Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup>**He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”**

<sup>35</sup>While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?”

## KEY VERSE

**He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”**

<sup>36</sup>Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.”

<sup>37</sup>He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. <sup>38</sup>When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. <sup>39</sup>He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” <sup>40</sup>But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. <sup>41</sup>He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha koum!” (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). <sup>42</sup>Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. <sup>43</sup>He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

### JESUS IS RECOGNIZED AS THE SOURCE OF HEALING

#### Mark 5:21-28

Our Scripture contains two healing stories, one dealing with Jairus’ daughter and the other dealing with the woman with a problem of bleeding. Mark begins by describing Jairus’ daughter’s urgent need of healing. He then narrates the healing of the bleeding woman before returning to describe the healing (raising) of the daughter.

Our text describes Jairus as “one of the synagogue rulers” (Mark 5:22). This officer would have been a man elected by his community to serve as the president of the local synagogue. Thus, Jairus would have been a man of significant prestige, highly respected in his community. He was not the kind of person who was accustomed to asking for help. Rather, he was accustomed to people asking him for help. The fact that he came to Jesus desperately seeking help is a significant point in this story.

The bleeding woman represents the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum. The culture of the biblical world suggests that the silence of the text about the woman’s husband means that she did not have one. She was either widowed, divorced, or never mar-

## Did You Know?

“Jesus’ presence is an active and instantly transforming presence: He is never the mere observer of the scene or the one who waits upon events but always the transformer of the scene and the initiator of events” (W. H. Vanstone quoted by David E. Garland, *Mark* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 226).

## JESUS FREED A WOMAN FROM HER SUFFERING

ried. In any case, she would have been shamed in her culture and made to feel worthless. Her long illness and the fact she had spent all her resources also tell us of her desperate circumstances. In her desperation, she turned to Jesus even though the text suggests she hoped He had magical powers to heal her.

In His ministry, the whole range of human society recognized their need of Jesus as the source of health and life. It is important that we recognize both the need of all people, including the successful and the poor, and the ability of Jesus to meet their need.

### Mark 5:29-34

Jesus’ healing of the bleeding woman happened “immediately,” and instantly she was able to tell in her body that she had been healed. The healing took place at the moment she touched Jesus’ garment. Mark describes her as “freed from her suffering.” The Greek word translated “suffering” here also meant a beating or flogging. The word implies the woman felt “beaten up” or “whipped” by her disease, but instantly that sense of defeat was transformed into victory by touching Jesus.

Jesus’ response came in three steps. First, He recognized that “power had gone out from him” (Mark 5:30). Jesus, who had the authority to heal, felt the supernatural power. The second part of His response is to ask who has touched Him, causing the healing power to leave Him. His disciples thought the question silly in view of the many people who pressed around bumping against Him. But Jesus considered it important to continue asking until the woman acknowledged what had happened to her and He could address the totality of her need.

The woman’s thought that all she needed was to touch Jesus’ cloak shows that her understanding of Jesus’ power was only at the level of the magical. She did not understand that Jesus’ healing went beyond the physical to provide the restoration of her heart

**Think About It**

Jesus never uses His power in a capricious or whimsical way, but always consistent with His nature as our Savior. In today's passage, Jesus uses His power to heal, to restore relationships, and demonstrate His victory over death.

**JESUS GAVE LIFE TO A YOUNG GIRL**

and life. For that to happen, she would need to speak with Jesus face-to-face and acknowledge her need to Him. His response would offer much more than simply physical healing. The Greek text of verse 34 literally says, "Daughter, your faith has saved you." As is almost always the case in the New Testament, the word "faith" here means much more than mental agreement. It means trust. The woman's complete trust in Jesus led to her healing.

**Mark 5:35-43**

No sooner had Jesus pronounced complete salvation for the bleeding woman than terrible news arrived from Jairus' house that his daughter had died. Death is the most fearful human experience because we know nothing about it from those who have experienced it. But in the most fearful of human experiences, Jesus' word is, "Don't be afraid; just believe" (v. 36). No matter the danger that threatens us, whether it is physical, spiritual, emotional, or financial, Jesus is the Lord of wholeness and life.

When Jesus restored the life of Jairus' daughter, He was once again demonstrating that He is Lord of health and life. But the Lord of health and life does not provide those gifts to us apart from our trusting Him. Deeper than His desire that we experience life and health is His desire that we experience the fullness of life and health. That fullness always requires a relationship with Him, a relationship of trust.

**REFLECT**

In what ways do you need God's healing touch in your life?

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January

31

# THE LORD OF CREATION

*Christ has authority over all creation.*

## THE WORD

**MARK**  
**6:45-56**

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.<sup>46</sup>After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

<sup>47</sup>Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. <sup>48</sup>He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, <sup>49</sup>**but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out,** <sup>50</sup>**because they all saw him and were terrified.**

### KEY VERSES

**Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”** <sup>51</sup>Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, <sup>52</sup>for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

<sup>53</sup>When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. <sup>54</sup>As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. <sup>55</sup>They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. <sup>56</sup>And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the market-places. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

This week we begin by finding Jesus retreating into mountains to pray. Mark follows his conventional storytelling style, underscoring once more the immediacy of the next act in our narrative: “Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on

ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd” (6:45). From Jesus’ mountain retreat, we will quickly find ourselves in, and on, the sea.

## CONTRARY WINDS **Mark 6:45-50a**

In the three of the four Gospels (all but Luke), the story of Jesus walking on the water immediately follows the feeding of the 5,000. This not only tells us that these two events in Jesus’ life happened near to each other in time, but that the early church saw an important theological connection between the two miracles. That connection is the role of Jesus as Lord of creation.

Mark’s gospel is fairly lean in comparison with its New Testament neighbors. So he offers us few clues about why Jesus sent His disciples away on the Sea of Galilee before dismissing the crowds who had just had their stomachs filled in 6:30-44. In his version of this same incident, John’s gospel reveals more, observing that “Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself” (6:15).

In the same way that a sea captain can read the skies for the elements of a brewing storm, Jesus is able to identify winds that blow contrary to His mission. So He separates those who could unite together against His purposes, then prayerfully retreats in search of wisdom.

While praying through the moonlit night from His mountain retreat, Jesus saw His disciples straining on the oars a few miles offshore because “the wind was against them” (Mark 6:48). Setting His own challenges aside, Jesus went to where His disciples were amid the windblown waves.

Then Mark offers a surprising detail: Jesus “was about to pass by them” (6:48c). To our modern sensibilities, this observation seems puzzling for a rescuer. But in the Old Testament, God’s presence was well known for “passing by.” Consider the Lord’s assur-

## Did You Know?

In Mark 6:48b, we learn that “Shortly before dawn, [Jesus] went out to them” on the stormy sea. This observation is consistent with the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace, which literally means “the grace of God that goes before.” The loving nature of God is mission-al; God reaches out to us. In the same way that God’s beckoning grace reaches out to us long before we have any awareness of it, Jesus comes alongside His disciples in their time of need.

### COURAGE IS PERSONAL

### TO THE EDGE, BUT NO FURTHER

ance to Moses: “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you . . .” (Exodus 33:19) or a similar echo in 1 Kings 19:11 when Elijah feared for his life and God commands, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Jesus came to them in one of their darkest times in their lives (the fourth watch was about three o’clock in the morning). Frightened by the storm, the disciples become even more terrified when they see Jesus walking on the waves, presuming Him to be a ghost instead. Not a phantom, not a ghost, not a figure conjured by their imagination—the real Jesus came to them. Reassuring the frightened disciples, Jesus immediately declares, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Then He climbs in to their boat and the winds cease at once.

#### Mark 6:50b-52

“It is I.” Jesus’ words of assurance should sound familiar to us, for they echo God’s covenant promise to Moses from Exodus 3:14: “I AM WHO I AM.” God’s very name encompasses all that it means to exist, both now and forever. A shorthand version of God’s name in Exodus could literally be understood as “I’ll be there.” In Mark, 6:50b, Jesus could boil it down to a similar promise in rhyme form: “I’m here—don’t fear.”

As people of faith, we’re often amazed by the discovery that courage is personal: our comfort and strength rests in Jesus, who commands even the winds and waves.

#### Mark 6:53-56

This portion of today’s text offers a glimpse behind Jesus’ strategy for once again the crowds gather as soon as Jesus and the disciples land along the shore.

Again, Mark records the intensity of the setting as the throngs press in on Jesus, clamoring for His healing touch. The word is out: Jesus the healer is near. Everyone was seemingly out for something from Jesus.

**Think About It**

Only the book of Matthew (14:22-34) records the fact that Peter bid Jesus to call him to walk out on the water as well. After a few steps, Peter lost his courage and faith and began to sink. Jesus encouraged Peter to trust Him entirely to avoid that “sinking feeling.”

And while those in need of healing found success by reaching out for even just the edge of Jesus’ cloak, Mark leaves us with a sense that so much more could have awaited them had they ventured further with Jesus. While healed, we’re not left with much of a sense that many had joined the path of discipleship.

Affirming Jesus Lord of creation seems obvious, but it is amazing how often we fail to apply that truth to our lives. If Jesus is Lord of creation and capable of calling the resources of both creation and heaven to meet the needs of His people, then we do not need to fear.

Jesus’ lordship over creation also means that God is in control of our world. The secular perspective of our society is so overwhelming that we can be easily tempted to think that molecules and mountains are all there is. Nevertheless, Jesus, the Lord of creation, controls and uses the molecules and mountains to accomplish His good purposes that are leading us, someday, to a new creation that will be free from the effects of sin. What a glorious day that will be!

**LORD OF CREATION****REFLECT**

Consider how the prevenient grace of God continues to go ahead of you. How does this understanding of God’s guiding presence give you courage?

JAY RICHARD AKKERMAN

February

7

# THE LORD OF THE DISPOSSESSED

*God's mercy and grace extend to everyone, regardless of race, physical challenges, status, or gender.*

## THE WORD

**MARK**  
**7:24-37**

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. <sup>25</sup>In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. <sup>26</sup>The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

<sup>27</sup>“First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

<sup>28</sup>“Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

<sup>29</sup>Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

<sup>30</sup>She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

<sup>31</sup>Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.

<sup>32</sup>There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

<sup>33</sup>After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. <sup>34</sup>He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “Ephphatha!” (which means “Be opened!”). <sup>35</sup>At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

<sup>36</sup>Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. <sup>37</sup>**People were overwhelmed**

**KEY VERSE**

**with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”**

## ENGAGE THE WORD

### BOLD HUMILITY

#### Mark 7:24-30

**T**his passage opens with Jesus leaving the land of the people of Israel to visit Tyre, a foreign city. This would have been a significant journey of some 40 miles by foot. There is no explanation why He makes this surprising trip and there is nothing else recorded about this trip other than the healing encounter that follows.

Today's scripture begins with an exchange that strikes us (in our cultural context) as strange, even uncomfortable. A mother brings her distress about her daughter to Jesus, only to have Jesus question the appropriateness of helping her (as a Greek)—possibly to the disadvantage of the people of Israel. Such cultural exclusivity seems out of place, especially coming from the lips of Jesus. But for the encounter, itself, this serves to identify her as an outsider, an unlikely recipient of Jesus' assistance.

The woman's response readily acknowledges she is a cultural outsider, an unlikely recipient of Jesus' healing grace. But rather than protest against it, she appeals to Jesus on its terms: "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." That is, grace may extend even to those who are at the margins.

This appeal of bold humility, and the faith it suggested, pleased Jesus. "For such a reply, you may go." Her request was answered. She went home to find her daughter whole. She had been enfolded within the reach of grace. We might be distracted by the uncomfortable language and cultural assumptions of priority. But we would miss the deeper meaning of this text. That is, no matter how unlikely or unworthy we may be as candidates for grace, Jesus responds to a bold humility that submits to Him and His mercy.

### Did You Know?

Jesus makes reference to Tyre in Matthew 11:20-24. He declares that the people of Tyre and Sidon would have repented if they had seen the miracles that the people of Bethsaida and Capernaum had seen. In other words, Jesus was saying that these foreigners would be more receptive to the gospel than the people of Israel.

### A STRANGE ENCOUNTER

#### Mark 7:31-35

The next encounter in this text invites us to witness Jesus healing a deaf man—another strange encounter. People in the community brought a deaf man to Jesus, asking for Jesus' blessing. Of course, in that time and culture, to be deaf would have meant being on the margins of life and community. Social acceptability and the lack of simple functionality would have limited this man's life in dramatic ways. The fact that Jesus acted to heal this deaf man is not surprising, but the "method" is certainly peculiar. Jesus put His fingers into the man's ears, then spit, and touched his tongue. With a sigh and call to be opened the man could hear and speak. Jesus' call "be opened" could apply to this man's life as well as his inability to hear and speak. His life was now opened to all the possibilities previously unavailable to him. This healing, like most healings, was not just a physical remedy but a restoration of life.

Jesus dealt with the deaf man in an unusual way. It is difficult to know how to interpret the curious methodology of this healing. What was it about touching the man's ears or touching his tongue? Since Jesus could have healed him with a word we might reasonably wonder why Jesus did what He did. Was it a lesson for those who watched? Jesus could certainly heal without specific physical methodologies (He just healed the Greek woman's daughter "in abstentia"! ). While the reasons may not be clear to us (and often they're not) it seems clear that Jesus dealt with this man in the way that was needed. But doesn't Jesus deal with each of us in particular ways? He seems to accommodate His approach to each of us to allow for who we are and what we need. He doesn't have a stock "healing technique"—one size fits all. And that may be the important lesson. Jesus deals with each of us in the ways that are particularly suited to what we understand or what we need. He meets the broken where they are, deals with them in the ways that are

**Think About It**

Jesus reminds us that He did not come to save the right kind of people. Rather, He came to offer salvation to everyone, regardless of where they were born or where they lived. He shows us that every person is made in the image of God, and, therefore, everyone can become a child of God.

**HE DOES ALL THINGS WELL!**

needed for each unique situation, and brings healing and new life.

**Mark 7:36-37**

It is hardly surprising that the crowd murmured with amazement “He has done everything well.” We should read this as a commentary on the whole record of Jesus’ ministry and not just this miracle. Mark wanted to bring us alongside the crowds to witness the life and ministry of Jesus to bring us to this conclusion: “He does everything well.” Brokenness of every sort has been brought to Jesus in these accounts and Jesus has healed and redeemed them all.

The message Mark wants us to gain from this is not just historical information, but compelling witness. He wants his readers to be moved—along with the people in his accounts—to a conclusion about Jesus. He does all things well.

It is not just for these people in these stories, but also for us, that Jesus does all things well. Whatever our brokenness or need, however damaged or marginalized we may be, Jesus does all things well. He can remedy our need, heal our brokenness, break open the doors to life. What was true for the people in these accounts can be true for us. If we bring our need to Jesus, He does all things well.

**REFLECT**

If we want to go where Jesus goes, where might that take us?

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February

14

# THE LORD OF ALL

*We must claim Jesus as Lord, recognizing that the ultimate truth is the identity of Christ and the ultimate value lies in following Him.*

## THE WORD

**MARK**  
**8:27—9:1**

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”  
<sup>28</sup>They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

<sup>29</sup>“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”  
Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

<sup>30</sup>Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup>He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup>He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

<sup>33</sup>But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

## KEY VERSE

<sup>34</sup>**Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.** <sup>35</sup>For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. <sup>36</sup>What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? <sup>37</sup>Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? <sup>38</sup>If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

**MARK 9:1**

<sup>1</sup>And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, some who are standing

here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

## ENGAGE THE WORD

### THE BIG QUESTION

#### Mark 8:27-30

**M**ark’s gospel account moves chronologically to its culmination with the death and resurrection of Jesus. But we come to the heart of the gospel and Mark’s purpose in writing it here in this brief exchange in the middle of the story. Jesus sets the stage with a preparatory question to begin focusing His disciples’ thinking. “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus was setting the context for a more probing question.

“But what about you?” He asked. “Who do you say I am?” Now it gets personal. We’re no longer discussing other people’s opinions and their correctness. Now we’re probing our understanding and our relationship with Jesus. There’s no neutral territory here. No place to hide. This is a direct question that has to be answered. And how we answer it will determine everything else.

### GETTING THE RIGHT MESSIAH

#### Mark 8:31-33

What a change of direction! To the reader it can leave a feeling of whiplash. Peter, speaking on behalf of the disciples, just made the sublime confession—Jesus is the Messiah. He recognizes who Jesus is. But in four more verses he is being rebuked by Jesus, even naming him with Satan! How can Peter get it so right and yet get it so wrong? And why is this account here in the text? Why humiliate Peter by highlighting his unfortunate confusion about the Messiah he just confessed?

We can be sure that this account is not simply arbitrary, nor is it included to embarrass Peter. Something important is at stake. This section of Scripture is set in the very heart of Mark’s gospel. He is trying to introduce us to Jesus in the hope that we, too, will come to a confession of Jesus as our Messiah, our Lord. We can be sure that this corrective is also meant for us,

### Did You Know?

The Greek word for “rebuke” is used on various occasions. Jesus rebuked evil spirits, the wind, and His disciples. The disciples rebuked crowds and parents who brought their children to Jesus. Peter rebuked Jesus, and then Jesus rebuked Peter for his rebuke. Rebuke is a stern word that expects conformity to the speaker’s wishes.

### FOLLOWING THE RIGHT JOURNEY

the readers. If that is so, what is the important message Mark is trying to convey to us?

It is possible to vigorously confess Jesus as Messiah and still get it wrong. That happens when the “messiah” we confess Jesus to be is not the Messiah He came to be. It can happen when we make Jesus into the Messiah we want, providing power and authority for the results, causes, or concerns that we bring to this encounter. Peter wanted a triumphant Messiah who would lead his people to a new day—probably casting off the yoke of the Romans. He certainly wasn’t enthusiastically welcoming the Messiah who would willingly suffer and die in apparent powerlessness. Jesus is cautioning Peter, and us, that to employ the power and authority of Christ to serve our ambitions and dreams is an impulse prompted by the Enemy, not the Spirit of God.

### Mark 8:34-37

Jesus turned to clarifying what following His messiahship would look like. Rather than joining a triumphant political liberator, to follow Jesus means they are to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow” Him. Following this Messiah calls for losing our lives. He calls for the death of self-interest. What we desire has to be set aside for the sake of what He desires. Our concerns are surrendered—even sacrificed—for the concerns of the kingdom.

After having “seen” (through Mark’s account) the demonstrations of miraculous power and evidence of spiritual authority it would be easy to see this Messiah as a gracious resource to enable our well-being and realization of our aspirations. But Mark records Jesus’ efforts to clearly dispel any such misunderstanding. Following this Messiah is a different journey. All His miracles and authority are leading Jesus to suffering and death on a cross. A strange end for the chosen One. Yet, this is the journey He took for our sakes. And it is the journey He calls us to take, following Him to the cross.

**Think About It**

Jesus demonstrates the seriousness of His lordship by describing the life of discipleship to which it calls. If Jesus is really Lord of all, then we are called to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow Jesus daily as obedient, submissive, disciples.

**HOW THE JOURNEY ENDS****Mark 8:38—9:1**

While the way of the disciple of Jesus leads to the cross, it does not end there. Jesus points to the culmination of the journey. The end of the story is the coming of the Christ and the kingdom in power and victory. In that culmination our destinies will be revealed and realized. What looked like defeat will be revealed as victory. Those who follow Jesus on the way to suffering and death for the sake of the kingdom will be vindicated, restored, and blessed. And the day, Jesus says, is coming!

Jesus ends this teaching with the declaration that “some who are standing here will not taste of death before they see the Kingdom of God has come with power.” Because we are inclined to read this as referring to Jesus’ second coming, it is confusing. But while Jesus will certainly come one glorious day, bringing the kingdom of God with power, some of those who heard Jesus speak these words also saw the powerful breaking in of the kingdom in their lifetimes. Pentecost would bring the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church. Talk about coming with power! Thousands answered the call to become followers of Jesus in the days following Pentecost. And that was only the beginning. The gospel swept the Roman world. Within their lifetimes Rome itself would be challenged by the rapidly growing community of followers of this crucified Jesus.

**REFLECT**

**T**hink about what it means for you to “take up” your “cross” each day?

CARL LETH

February

21

# THE LORD OF GLORY

*By the transfiguration, God the Father reveals Jesus' glory and confirms His authority and identity.*

## THE WORD

MARK  
9:2-13

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. <sup>3</sup>His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. <sup>4</sup>And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

<sup>5</sup>Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” <sup>6</sup>(He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

### KEY VERSE

**<sup>7</sup>Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”**

<sup>8</sup>Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. <sup>10</sup>They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what “rising from the dead” meant.

<sup>11</sup>And they asked him, “Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”

<sup>12</sup>Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? <sup>13</sup>But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.”

## ENGAGE THE WORD

Today's text is one of the most mysterious texts in Scripture. It has intrigued and perplexed commentators across the centuries. The disciples see Jesus in a miraculous meeting with Elijah and Moses, followed by the dramatic appearance of a cloud, out of which God speaks. Then, everything vanished in a moment, leaving them alone with Jesus.

## WITNESSING CONFIRMATION

### Mark 9:2-8

The disciples were just coming from a confusing conversation with Jesus about His identity and mission (Mark 8:27—9:1). They had confessed Jesus' identity as the Christ only to hear Jesus explain what that would mean (His suffering and death) in ways that contradicted their assumptions about messiahship. Peter—ever the bold one—took it upon himself to “correct” Jesus about his notions about being the Messiah. Jesus' chastisement of Peter must have been devastating. Jesus was turning their whole conceptual world upside down.

This extraordinary mountaintop encounter would confirm with stunning clarity that Jesus was certainly the One who was to come and would affirm the surprising journey He was consciously taking. Jesus' inner circle—Peter, James, and John—were invited to accompany Jesus as witnesses to this divine encounter. Alone on a high mountain, the disciples witness Jesus' appearance transfigured into a dazzling white. It was impossible to miss the indication of Jesus' special character by this transformed appearance. Then, standing with Jesus in His dazzling glory, they saw Moses and Elijah, in conversation with Jesus. The presence of Moses and Elijah meant more than a dramatic cameo appearance. Moses, as the great law-giver, and Elijah, as the greatest of the prophets, represented the height of God's work among the Jewish people. Their presence signaled Jesus' authority as the culmination of God's redemptive work. The work of redemption that God had been doing throughout

### Did You Know?

The location of the mountain where Jesus was transfigured is unknown. However, from the time of Origen (c. 185-254) many have maintained Mount Tabor, near Nazareth. Others believe that it was a part of Mount Hermon, near Caesarea Philippi.

the long history of the Jewish people was coming to its fulfillment in Jesus. Their presence was immediately followed by the appearance of cloud. A cloud was a traditional sign of God's immediate presence with the people of Israel. It led the people on their journey through the wilderness (Exodus 16:10, 19:9, 33:9) and it was the confirming sign of God's presence in the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:10). When the Messiah came the cloud of God's presence would return. Its appearance here was another confirmation of Jesus as the Messiah. Out of the cloud came a (divine) voice declaring, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Reminiscent of the Father's declared affirmation at Jesus' baptism at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Mark 1:9-11), this affirmation demonstrated the Father's approval of the end of Jesus' ministry. From beginning to end the Father publicly affirmed Jesus' identity and relation to the Father. This left no doubt about the authority and status of Jesus, what He was doing, and what He had to say (no matter how perplexing). Jesus was the Messiah of power, come to His people.

### ANTICIPATING COMPLETION

#### Mark 9:9-13

Following their experience of the transfiguration, you would think that, given the extraordinary scenes they had witnessed, the disciples would never question Jesus or His actions again. Of course, you would think that we should have witnessed and experienced enough of God's presence and power to trust Him implicitly. But we persistently try to get God to fit into our understanding or sense of what's good. So it should not be surprising that, despite witnessing the Transfiguration, the disciples are (still) confused and questioning. Baffled by the instruction to wait "until the Son of Man had risen from the dead" they went back to traditional expectations of Elijah's (triumphant) coming. Jesus corrected their expectations and interpreted the role of Elijah as realized in the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist. Here, again, Jesus'

**Think About It**

Mark's account of the transfiguration was intended to strengthen our confidence in God, increase our awareness of God's love, and motivate us to proclaim the great plan of salvation provided by the Lord of Glory.

—Dr. Roger Hahn

vision of the messianic event looked very different from theirs. Elijah was supposed to come in triumph, preparing the way for the Messiah's appearance in glory and power (Malachi 4:5, 6). John the Baptist ended up in prison, ultimately beheaded at the request of a vengeful woman. The identification must have been troubling. If the forerunner was executed, what might that suggest for the Messiah that followed?

While we are dazzled by the extraordinary vision of the transfiguration it is likely that the more incomprehensible revelation in this text was Jesus' persistent description of His messianic mission in terms of suffering and death. That's not how the Messiah was supposed to come. Yet the affirmation of Elijah, Moses, and the voice of God, the Father, placed Jesus' authority and identity beyond question. The disciples' heads had to be spinning as they descended the mountain with Jesus.

In the end, perhaps this dramatic account has more practical meaning than we might assume at first glance. The disciples aren't the only people to come away from a mysterious encounter with God that turned their expectations upside down, perhaps even disappointing. Disappointed, dazzled, and baffled we, like Peter, try to make God fit into something that makes sense to us. But He doesn't fit into our understanding or expectations. The one who is the culmination of God's work of salvation in history, the very presence of God, himself, calls us to quietly follow Him on the road to the work that lies before Him—and us—trusting that He knows the way and deserves our faithful obedience.

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**REFLECT** **W**hat could you do today to give God glory?

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CARL LETH

February

28

# THE LORD OF VICTORY OVER EVIL

*Jesus, as God's Son, is victorious over all forms of evil; His Lordship provides power for our victorious living.*

## THE WORD

**MARK**  
**9:14-29**

**W**hen they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.

<sup>15</sup>As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

<sup>16</sup>“What are you arguing with them about?” he asked.

<sup>17</sup>A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech.

<sup>18</sup>Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”

<sup>19</sup>“You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

<sup>20</sup>So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

<sup>21</sup>Jesus asked the boy's father, “How long has he been like this?”

“From childhood,” he answered. <sup>22</sup>“It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

<sup>23</sup>“If you can't?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

<sup>24</sup>Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

<sup>25</sup>**When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I**

## KEY VERSE

**command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”**

<sup>26</sup>The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” <sup>27</sup>But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

<sup>28</sup>After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

<sup>29</sup>He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

## ENGAGE THE WORD

### GETTING TO THE RIGHT PLACE

#### Mark 9:14-19

**T**his story begins with failure. A distressed and desperate father brought his deeply afflicted son in hopes of some help. He found some of Jesus’ disciples, asking them to help. And they tried. We can easily imagine that they tried passionately and energetically, but without success. No doubt encouraged by their lack of success, the teachers of the law who were looking on joined in the public conversation. They rejoiced publicly in the disciples’ inability to help the boy. The distressed man and his suffering son seem to have been quickly forgotten in the contest of authority between Jesus’ disciples and the teachers of the law.

Jesus encountered this scene, asking for an explanation. The exasperated father was happy to fill in the gaps—both his son’s serious condition and his complaint about the failure of Jesus’ disciples to provide any kind of remedy. The precise meaning of Jesus’ stinging rebuke (of the unbelieving generation) is difficult to determine. But it is easy to imagine His frustration at religious leaders—His own disciples as well as the teachers of the law—being preoccupied with a “turf war” rather than the needs of the child.

Jesus’ expression of frustration was quickly followed by a clarification that went to the heart of the problem at hand. “Bring the boy to me,” He said. Ultimately, the father’s request could only be satisfied by Jesus, himself. He had asked the disciples “but they could not.”

### Did You Know?

The word “believe” occurs over 80 times in the Gospels alone, making it one of the key words in the New Testament. The Greek word means “to rely on,” “to trust,” and “to believe.”

### IF YOU CAN

### HE IS ABLE

#### Mark 9:20-23

“So they brought him.” Finally, we are where something can get done. The description of the boy’s actions and the father’s account of his life-long condition are disturbing. Modern medical analysis would probably diagnose the problem differently, but that shouldn’t distract us from the clear witness that this boy suffered from a serious, persistent, and life-threatening condition that no one was able to remedy. The situation was desperate, verging on hopeless. It is clear that the father was not confident that Jesus could do anything. He was just desperate. “If you can do anything,” he says, “take pity on us and help us.” Jesus’ response was both corrective and hope-giving. “If you can?” Jesus replied. He corrects our interaction with Him. It is never “if you can.” He always “can.” He is able.

#### Mark 9:24-27

The father’s response to Jesus is a wonderful combination of desperate faith and vulnerable honesty. He believes, he declares, anxious to tap the “everything” that is possible when we believe in Christ. At the same time, he confesses the inadequacy of that faith. Part of him doubts that all of this is true. He acknowledges the weakness of his faith and pleads for Jesus’ help to overcome his lack, lest it prevent the healing he so desperately seeks.

What makes this interaction such good news is Jesus’ response. Note that He acts in response to the father’s faltering confession, without further dialogue with the father. He doesn’t rectify the father’s inadequacies first, then proceed. He simply proceeds to heal the son. What an encouraging message for all of us who resonate with the father’s vulnerable confession. We too may experience times of “but, Lord, help me overcome my unbelief, my uncertain faith.” Jesus meets this father where he is and responds with grace and power on his behalf. He also meets those

**Think About It**

Faith does not have to be perfect to be real. Like this father, we confess our trust and at the same time confess our lack of perfect trust, and find that Jesus is totally faith-worthy and trustworthy.

like him—people like us—where we are, responding with grace despite our inadequacies. We don't have to meet the high standard of perfect faith or life for God to act to help us. We just need to come to Jesus honestly with our imperfect faith. He will meet us there.

In response to the father's plea Jesus acted to heal the boy. He commanded the deaf and mute spirit to come out. For our scientific western minds the notion of a deaf and mute spirit is alien to us. Can we avoid a distracting intellectual debate (like the one in the beginning of this passage) by simply affirming that Jesus acted with directness and power to remedy the boy's sickness. He healed him of his dangerous and persistent sickness, which no one else could remedy. He made him whole.

**KNOWING THE KING****Mark 9:28-29**

This passage ends with a brief, but intriguing exchange between Jesus and the disciples. They wanted to know why they couldn't drive the demon out in the first place (without Jesus' direct aid). Jesus' response is cryptic and leaves us uncertain of His meaning. "This kind can come out only by prayer" He says. Some versions read "prayer and fasting." There has been a long discussion about what Jesus meant. I won't hope to resolve that discussion here. But what seems clear is that the key to accessing understanding and power is getting deeper into our relationship with Christ. Persistently, intentionally pursuing a deepening relationship with Christ will surely get us where we need to be. That effort should never be merely a strategy to access greater power. That never works. But it is always the answer to tapping the mysteries of the kingdom—getting to know the King better.

**REFLECT**

In what ways do you need God's strength and power in your life today?

# Key Verse Memory

Committing God's Word to memory is an important goal for Christians of every age. To assist you in this worthy objective, we have suggested three key verses for memorization. Select one to memorize each month or memorize one of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Winter 2020-21:

**Psalm 89:1**

**1 Peter 1:15**

**Mark 8:34**

## COMING NEXT QUARTER

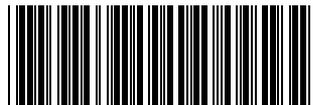
**Spring 2021**

### **Romans**

Paul's letter to the Romans provides a clear and systematic understanding of Christian doctrine—giving interpretation to the meaning of Christ's life and death. During this study, we will see the ways in which holiness of heart and life is the goal for every believer.



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