

**MARK: Glimpses of the Kingdom**

**“Foreshadowing the Cross”**

**Mark 8:22–38, 9:1**

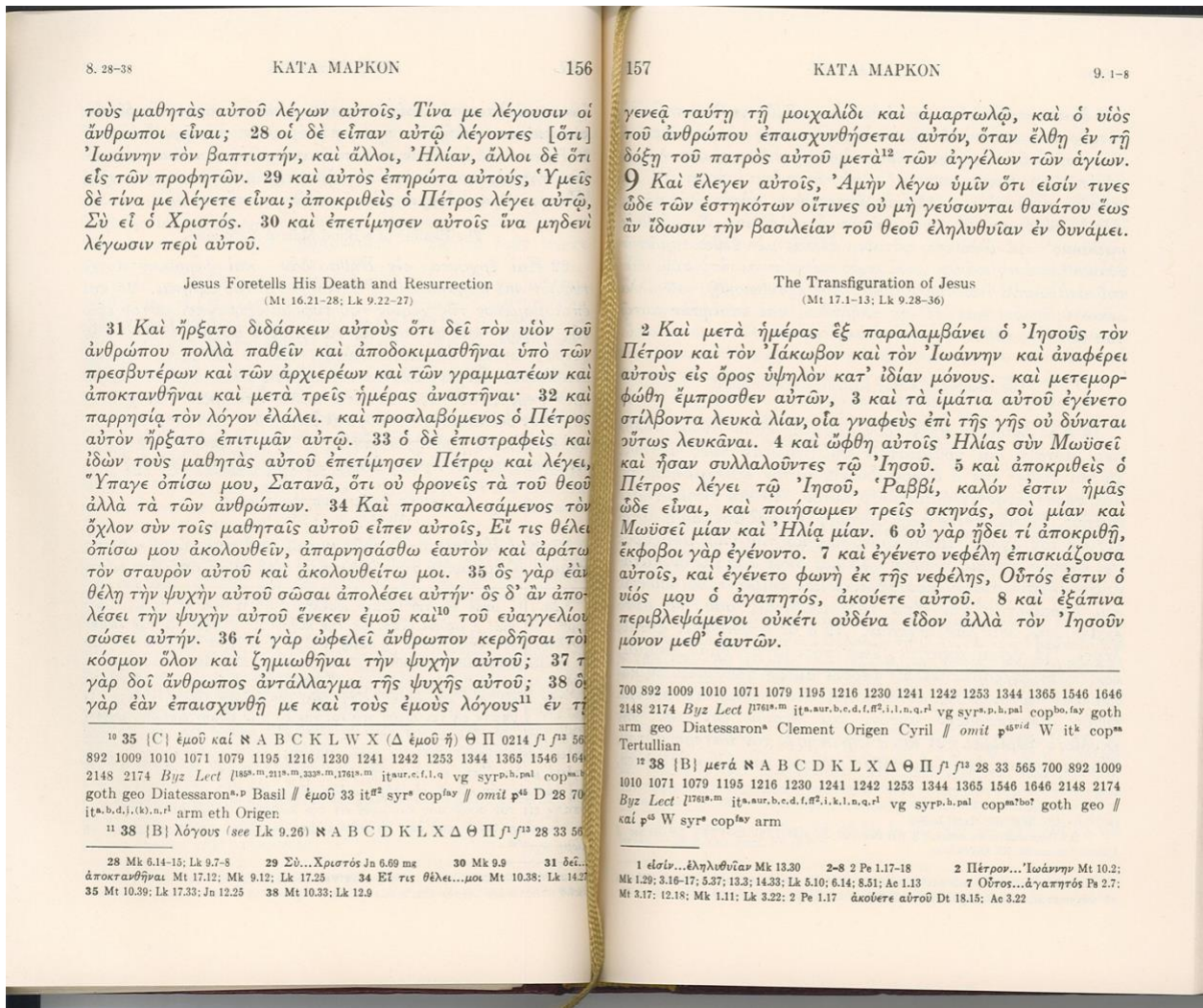
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This morning’s message is sermon #5 in our 13-week journey through Mark’s Gospel. For the first seven weeks, we’re focusing on the theme “Glimpses of the Kingdom.” Mark’s consistent message through Jesus’ teaching, preaching and ministry is that God’s kingdom has arrived with the coming of Jesus.

During Lent, we’ll go day by day through Jesus’ last week, beginning with Palm Sunday and ending with Good Friday. Mark compresses nearly three and a half years of Jesus’ ministry into chapters 1–8 of his gospel, and then takes the last eight chapters—chapters 9–16—for the final two weeks or so of Jesus’ life. Chapter 8, which we’ll be exploring today, is the pivot point of Mark’s Gospel. In today’s passage of Scripture, Jesus becomes more explicit about what’s going to happen to Him and about his expectations for his followers.

If you have your Bibles or electronic devices, please find Mark 8:22. Before I read today’s Scripture, I want to talk a bit about how our Scriptures are laid out. First, you’ll note that above verse 22 is a heading that, depending on the translation of the Bible you use, probably says something like “Jesus Heals a Blind Man at Bethsaida.” Next, you’ll see there are small numbers designating verses in front of each sentence or two. Finally, our modern-day Bibles have frequent paragraph breaks—I see 11 paragraph breaks in the 18 verses that comprise today’s text.



The section headings, verse numbers, and paragraph breaks weren't part of the original Scripture; they're provided to make it easier for us to read and understand Scripture. To illustrate what I'm talking about, I've put a page of our text as it appears in my Greek New Testament on the screen for us. Notice how compressed the words and sentences are. I'm pointing this out to you because, while these editorial features make it easier for us to read Scripture, they have an unintended consequence; they lead us to read and study Scripture in small portions, and in so doing, we often miss the bigger picture of how verses, paragraphs and chapters fit together. We zoom in so closely looking at words and verses and paragraphs that we miss the connections between them. In other words, we get so focused on the trees that we lose sight of the forest.

I was guilty of this early last week. I intended to start our sermon at verse 27, where Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say I am?” But I went back to see what came before verse 27, and I read the passage where Jesus healed a blind man. As I read this account, I noticed for the first time that the healing of the blind man serves as Mark’s introduction to Jesus’ conversation with his disciples about his identity. I encourage you to follow along as I read Mark 8:22–26, Mark’s introduction to the heart of chapter 8 and 9.

<sup>22</sup>They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. <sup>23</sup>He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?” <sup>24</sup>He looked up and said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.” <sup>25</sup>Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. <sup>26</sup>Jesus sent him home, saying, “Don’t even go into the village.” – Mark 8:22–26

When I read those verses on Tuesday morning—verses I’ve read dozens of times—I was struck by the oddness of Jesus’ healing. Why did the man’s eyesight return to him in stages? Couldn’t Jesus have healed him so that he had 20/20 vision right away? As I read those verses, it was on my mind how strategic Mark was in constructing his Gospel, and I thought, “The restoration of the blind man’s eyesight seems to be connected with the inability of people to see clearly who Jesus was.”

I wanted to explore this a bit more, so I looked into N.T. Wright’s commentary on this passage. Here’s what Wright has to say: “Mark has put together the story of the blind man receiving his sight and of the blind disciples gaining their insight in order to highlight what’s going on [with the disciples].” In other words, the blind man’s inability to see and then his receiving his sight in stages is a picture of the disciples’, along with the Jewish religious leaders’ and the crowd’s inability to understand that Jesus was God’s Son, the Messiah. Just as the blind man was finally able to see, Jesus’ disciples and others who had eyes to see would soon realize who Jesus was. We’ll see this more clearly as I read Mark 8:27–30.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

After all of his teaching, preaching, and miracles, Jesus finally asks his disciples, who have followed Him for over three years, if they realize who He is. He first asks them the question, “Who do people say I am?” They reply, “John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets.” And then Jesus asks the question He really wants them to answer: “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” And perhaps surprisingly, the one who gets it right is Peter, the disciple who is often the most clueless. Peter says, “You are the Messiah.”

Matthew, in his gospel, gives more information. In Matthew’s account, Jesus tells Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.” Jesus knew the truth of his identity could only be accepted by people when God, through the Holy Spirit, had prepared their hearts to receive. So, Jesus tells them not to tell this to anyone else. That may seem a strange command to us, but it highlights Jesus’ awareness that people needed to be prepared by God before they were able to receive this truth. I’ll pick up reading at verse 31 of Mark chapter 8:

<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.”

Now that his disciples understand more clearly who Jesus is, He’s ready to move them into deeper truths. Jesus had hinted about his suffering in other places, but here He says

definitively that He was going to suffer, be rejected by the religious leaders, and then ultimately be killed.

Then Peter, who had just had this amazing God-given revelation about Jesus' identity, took Jesus aside and corrected Him. This is classic Peter (and many of us can probably relate)—one moment displaying great insight or commitment to Jesus, and the next moment showing his human frailty in a painfully embarrassing way. Peter took Jesus aside, but Jesus spoke so all the disciples could hear. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Jesus saw Peter's rebuke for what it was: a temptation of Satan to avoid the difficult path of suffering that led to the cross by choosing an easier path. And just as He'd done during Satan's temptations in the wilderness, Jesus resisted the enemy. Follow along as I read verses 34-38.

<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."

It was hard enough for the disciples and the crowds to hear that Jesus was going to suffer and die, but now Jesus' message gets much tougher. He tells his disciples and the crowds of people that being a disciple means they have to deny themselves, be willing to give up their life, and they can't shy away from or be ashamed of Jesus and his words.

Jesus' kingdom has been rightly called "The Upside-Down Kingdom," because the values of his kingdom are diametrically opposed to the world's values. Listen again to these statements and think about how they cut against the grain of our culture:

- Being Jesus' disciple means I have to deny myself and take up my cross—crosses were associated with execution, so what does this statement even mean? Would disciples of Jesus be killed?

- If a disciple of Jesus tries to save their life, they'll lose it, and if they lose their life for Jesus and the gospel, they'll be saved.
- If any disciple of Jesus is ashamed Him or his words, He will be ashamed of them before his Father.

Jesus' words were undeniably difficult and hard to accept. It's easy for us at times to be hard on the disciples for their cluelessness and hardheartedness, but these words and concepts would have been difficult for any of us to accept. I want to conclude our reading in Mark's Gospel by reading verse 1 of chapter 9; even though it's a new chapter, this verse wraps up chapter 8.

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." – Mark 9:1

Jesus often seemed to speak cryptically, which partially explains why his 12 disciples frequently struggled to understand what He was saying. Verse 1 of Mark chapter 9 has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Some think that with these words, Jesus was referring to his second coming, when He'll come back for his Church, but that can't be right, because Jesus' second coming still hasn't happened. Others think that because of the placement of these words in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is referring to his transfiguration, which Pastor Evan is going to preach about next week. I don't think that fits, because Jesus' transfiguration happened just six days after this, so I doubt if many of the crowd or the disciples died during that short window. I could be wrong about this, but my thought is that in this statement, Jesus is referring once again to his death and resurrection, and perhaps more specifically, to God demonstrating his power on the Day of Pentecost—the birth of the Church—by sending his Holy Spirit to rest on all of the believers. In any case, Jesus is pointing ahead to God's kingdom being evident through a display of God's power.

So what are you and I to take away from Mark chapter 8 in 2023—2,000 years after Jesus spoke these words? Here are some questions I'd like to pose and would encourage us to prayerfully consider?

- How does Jesus' claim to be the Messiah, God's Son, impact my daily life?
- What does it look like for me to take up my cross and follow Jesus?
- What does it mean to lose my life for Jesus so I'll be saved?
- How do I embrace and own Jesus and his words, rather than being ashamed by them?

I'm concerned that my attempts to answer these questions for you, even with some general examples, might degenerate into legalism. Jesus' answer for you on any of these questions might look very different than his answer for me or the person sitting next to you.

What Jesus was emphasizing to his disciples and the crowds really gets at a mindset shift—a different philosophy of life or worldview. The concept of Jesus' kingdom being “upside-down” is apropos, because living in Jesus' kingdom looks and feels very different than fully embracing the life and values of the kingdoms of this world. I'd like us to allow the Holy Spirit to answer these questions for us and to apply them to our lives by meditating on some words from Jesus' most famous sermon—The Sermon on the Mount. As I read selected verses from Matthew's Gospel, chapters 6–7 from The Message paraphrase, I encourage you to assume the posture that best allows you to tune into the Holy Spirit. For some, that may be reading the words on the screen as I read, for others it may be just listening, and for others it may be closing your eyes and assuming a posture of prayer. The important thing is that you quiet your heart and allow God to speak to you:

Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.

You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and Money both.

If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds.

Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.



But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards. – Matthew 6–7, selected verses (The Message Paraphrase)

Jesus, let your kingdom come!