

“A Ransom for Many”

The Thirty-Second in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 10:32-52; Leviticus 5:14-6:7

When the kingdom of God comes in power, everything sinful men and women believe about God, sin, and salvation, is turned on its head. As Jesus makes his way from Capernaum toward Jerusalem, it is becoming apparent to all that his messianic ministry is coming to its climax. Throughout this journey south, Jesus continues to teach his disciples about the kingdom of God and how it confounds all human expectations, including the expectations of the disciples. Jesus has already told them that the kingdom of God has nothing to do with human greatness, piety, or social standing. Jesus has told his disciples that it would be better to go through life maimed, than allow anything to cause them or another to stumble. Jesus has told them that unless the kingdom is received like a little child receives a gift, no one will enter it. And now as Jesus continues to instruct his disciples about the nature of the kingdom, he will speak of his coming death and resurrection and declare that his act of self-sacrifice will save his people from their sins. This is how it is with the kingdom of God.

As we continue our study of Mark’s Gospel, we are now in Mark chapter 10 and covering that period in Jesus’ messianic mission during the time Jesus left Capernaum and began making his way to Jerusalem. In “going up to” Jerusalem (actually heading south to Jerusalem), Jesus is setting the stage for a final conflict with the religious leaders of Israel, which will lead to Jesus’ death for our sins and his resurrection from the dead three days later. In this section of Mark, we also find Jesus preparing his disciples for what is yet to come. The turning point in the Gospel came when the disciples believe that Jesus is the Christ. Now they must come to grips with the fact that people can do absolutely nothing to save themselves from the guilt and power of sin. As we have seen, great piety, great wealth, and high social standing, does not qualify someone for entrance into the kingdom of God. Jesus shocked his disciples when he told them that these things might actually be a hindrance to entering the kingdom of God, since piety, wealth, and prestige may encourage people to rely upon their own righteousness and merit, thereby stumbling them.

As we saw in Mark 10:17-31, a wealthy young man sought out Jesus and asked him, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” When Jesus recited a number of the commandments to the young ruler, he claimed that he had kept all of these commandments from his youth. Then Jesus told him that he must sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. Jesus knew that this would expose the fact that the man hadn’t kept the commandments as he thought. The young man’s rabbis, no doubt, had taught him that if he never took anything, he wasn’t a thief. They taught him that if he had never cheated on his wife, he was not an adulterer. Instead, Jesus tells him that external conformity to the law was not enough. If this man was not willing to sell all his possessions, then he really wasn’t interested in doing what was necessary to inherit eternal life. This man must renounce his own righteousness and receive eternal life as a free gift. But the young man walked away from Jesus heart-broken, because he was not willing to give sell his possessions, which meant giving up his status. This man was not ready to say “I cannot save myself.” He was not ready to receive the free gift Jesus offered him—entrance into the kingdom.

When the disciples heard Jesus’ answer and saw the young man leave Jesus downcast, they too came to the point of despair. “Who, then, can be saved?” They asked Jesus. Having finally realized that there is absolutely nothing men and women can do to inherit eternal life, Jesus revealed to them the very essence of the gospel—with men this is impossible, but with God all things are impossible. Jesus’ point is that we

cannot inherit eternal life *until* we quit trying to earn it. It is not until we come to the point of despair, and cry out “who, then, can be saved?” that we are finally willing to receive the kingdom as a child. This was a very important breakthrough for the disciples. Having realized that they can do nothing to save themselves, Jesus returns to the difficult task of informing the twelve of what is yet to come—Jesus will be betrayed, arrested, humiliated, he will suffer, he will die, and then he will be raised from the dead.

In our passage, which takes us through the balance of Mark 10, Jesus continues to teach his disciples about the kingdom of God and what is entailed if we are to be saved from the guilt and power of sin. And once again, Jesus’ disciples will struggle with their master’s words. Mark will reveal how little they comprehend of Jesus’ messianic mission and their role in it.

We learn for the first time in Mark 10:32 that Jesus’ mission will indeed take him all the way to Jerusalem. Knowing that this is where they were heading, the scene as described by Mark is very solemn. There is already great tension between Jesus and the Jewish religious leadership. People have witnessed this on a number of occasions and they certainly understand that if Jesus goes all the way to Jerusalem, there will be conflict. It is inevitable. Mark’s account makes mention of this great tension in the first part of verse 32. *“They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.”* Mark uses the traditional language here of Jewish pilgrims “going up” to Jerusalem, which was the city set upon a hill where the temple of the Lord stood in all its glory.¹ The messianic king will claim his throne.

The very fact that Jesus was leading his disciples up to Jerusalem meant that Jesus is taking this action to fulfill the purpose for which God has sent him. Jesus is Israel’s Messiah. In a sense, Jerusalem is Jesus’ royal city. Therefore, we need to be clear that this is not a circumstance in which Jesus suddenly decides to head south on a whim—“oh, let’s go to Jerusalem, we haven’t been there yet,” but is clearly one in which Jesus is acting as Israel’s Messiah, who is leading his people to his holy city to claim what is rightfully his, David’s royal throne. It is Jesus’ solemn determination to do this which creates the sense of awe and amazement.² Jesus is determined to go to his death because it is the Father’s will for him to do so. The disciples are “amazed,” while the people who are following Jesus are said to be afraid. They have witnessed the repeated conflicts between Jesus and the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. They know that the Sanhedrin will not welcome Jesus and that they will seek to put him to death. They also know that Rome will not tolerate any kind of conflict (political unrest) among the Jews who come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Therefore the disciples are amazed and the people are afraid because they know the journey to Jerusalem will create a potentially dangerous situation.

Mark tells us of another reason why tension level has increased. According to the latter part of verse 32, *“Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him.”* The disciples are not able to fully comprehend this message when Jesus delivers it to them. The stumbling block is this. If Jesus is truly the Messiah, how is it that he will suffer and die? The disciples have no category for reconciling Jesus’ messianic kingship with his role as the suffering servant. For the third time, Jesus explains to the twelve what was about to happen. This time, Jesus does so in the most exacting detail. Mark recounts our Lord’s words in verses 33-35, *“We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death*

¹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 374.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 374.

and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.” Of all of the predictions made so far by Jesus, this one is far and away the most detailed, and will be fulfilled with an amazing accuracy.³

There are five main elements in this prophecy and it is helpful to look at them individually so we don't miss their significance. First, Jesus predicts that he will be betrayed, which is a prophecy of the despicable actions of Judas, who was one of the twelve and the group's treasurer. This probably includes the fact that Jesus will be deserted by his disciples. Jesus also tells the twelve that he will end up at the mercy of the Sanhedrin, which, in part, may explain the solemn nature of this procession as they make their way to Jerusalem. Jesus has flat-out told them to expect that this mission will end in seeming disaster. It is no wonder, then, that the group did not seem to be excited to be heading south.

Second, Jesus has also made plain in this prophecy that he will be sentenced to death. The disciples knew that this is the very thing that the Pharisees had been seeking from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Repeatedly, they had tried to find Jesus guilty of some capital offense. To hear that the Pharisees would accomplish this was very difficult for the disciples to accept, especially since Jesus had been so adept at responding to the Pharisees and turning their arguments back against them.

Third, on top of the announcement that Jesus will be arrested and sentenced to death comes news that Jesus will be delivered over to the Gentiles (i.e., the Romans). This is new information and has not been mentioned in the previous prophecies. This too was tough for the disciples to accept. How can Israel's Messiah end up under arrest, and then be handed over to the Romans? If Jesus could calm the wind with a word, if he could raise the dead, heal the blind and deaf, how can he end up suffering at the hands of the Gentiles? Then Jesus tells them that the Romans will mock him, spit upon him, before flogging him. You can just imagine how well this news went over. Jesus will not only be held in contempt by his own people, but by their Roman oppressors as well. This was the worst possible outcome.

But that is not all that Jesus predicted. Fourth, Jesus tells them he will be put to death, only to be raised from the dead three days later—the fifth thing specifically mentioned by Jesus. The disciples hear Jesus when he says that he will die. This news is what makes his prediction so troubling. But they have trouble hearing him when he says, “he will rise again from the dead.” The bad news is so bad, that the glorious news of resurrection does not seem to register. In fact, the disciples will not understand these words until Jesus' post-resurrection appearances the first Easter. This was all very difficult to hear, much less comprehend. All of these things are fulfilled in great detail as recorded in Mark 14:53-16:8. And so after hearing this difficult and detailed prediction from Jesus, we can now understand what Mark meant when he described the disciples as “astonished,” or “amazed.” The trip to Jerusalem was a solemn journey and not a sight-seeing vacation.

That the disciples still do not get it, becomes all too clear in verses 35-45. Just as in the previous chapter when Jesus overheard them arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom, now we find two disciples wanting Jesus to appoint them to positions of high-standing when the kingdom comes in power. Once again, the disciples have no idea whatsoever of that for which they are asking.

Despite the fact that Jesus has on three occasions told the disciples about his coming death and

³ See the helpful chart in: [Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 375.](#)

resurrection, and despite the fact that Jesus has told them on at least one occasion that they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Jesus, two of the disciples want to be given positions of prestige in the kingdom. When others heard about this, they were indignant, which indicates that they were just as much concerned about status as were the sons of Zebedee! Personal ambition has no place in the kingdom of God and continues to be a huge problem among the disciples.⁴ Mark describes this incident in verses 35-37. *“Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask.’ ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ he asked. They replied, ‘Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.’”*

Once again, the very fact that this account which describes the negative behavior of the disciples, makes it into the gospel, and clearly indicates the eyewitness character of the gospels. If the disciples (or their followers) made this stuff up, why would they include information which makes two of the main authors of the New Testament (James and John) look so petty and insecure? Obviously, they wouldn't. This account has the ring of truth about it.⁵ We should also not miss the fact that Jesus must have been heart-broken by this whole discussion. But despite all of this, Jesus gently points out to the disciples how the question itself betrays their lack of understanding. *“You don't know what you are asking,’ Jesus said. ‘Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?’”* Jesus has just told them that he is going up to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He knows that upon the cross he must drink the cup of God's wrath down to the bitter dregs. Throughout the Old Testament, a cup of wine is used as a metaphor for God's judgment. Jesus has just told them that he will bear the wrath of God. Furthermore, Jesus states that he will also undergo a baptism, which conveys the image of being overwhelmed (subsumed) by danger and which may have conjured up images of John's baptism of repentance, which was tied to the judgment of God.⁶ These are remarkable words.

James and John have heard Jesus' words, but have no idea as to what these words actually mean for them and for Jesus. Almost without hesitation, we read in verse 30 of their response. *“We can,’ they answered.”* On the one hand, we see that they are willing to follow Jesus to their own deaths, and this is certainly commendable. But on the other hand, there is no way for them to understand the nature of Christ's suffering and that to which they are saying “yes.” Jesus will bear in his own body, the wrath of God. He will suffer and die for us and in our place. His death will save others. James and John cannot possibly understand this. That soon becomes evident in Jesus' reply. *“Jesus said to them, ‘You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.’”*

Having told Jesus that they were willing to suffer for him, Jesus now informs James and John that they will indeed suffer because of their willingness to follow their master. Josephus will record that James was killed by the Jews in Jerusalem in 62 A.D.⁷ John will serve Christ until, as an old man, he will be

⁴ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 414.

⁵ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 336-337.

⁶ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 380-381.

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20:197

imprisoned and exiled to the Island of Patmos, dying sometime around A.D. 95.⁸ Notice that Jesus also tells James and John that it is not his place to grant a seat of authority on his left or on his right. These positions have been prepared in light of God's eternal decree to which Jesus now willingly submits. Jesus will do his Father's will, not his own.⁹ These positions of authority are not his to grant.

But this is not the end of the story. As we read in verse 41, "*When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.*" Lest we think the other ten disciples more noble than James and John, we need to carefully consider the fact that their anger with James and John is not so much that they asked Jesus about their roles in kingdom, but with the fact that the ten did not think to ask Jesus about this themselves. The ten are angry because James and John might get some advantage over them and they are indignant that the sons of Zebedee got the jump on them. Such indignation only reveals that the ten are every bit as concerned with their status as were James and John.

Jesus will deal with this by once again reminding the disciples of how the kingdom of God completely reverses people's expectations. "*Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.'*" In God's economy of redemption, those who wish to be great, must renounce all claims to greatness. They must seek to serve others, not claim authority and seek control. This is the same theme Jesus set out in Mark 10:31, which is restated here in more detail. Disciples must serve, not lord it over others. The first shall be last and the last, first.

To ram this point home, in verse 45 Jesus goes on to apply this principle of servanthood to his own messianic mission. "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" Jesus is God in human flesh. He is Israel's Messiah. He is Israel's Davidic king. Yet, despite all of that to which he is rightfully entitled, he has not come in luxury and splendor. Instead, he has come to his people as a servant of all men, and a bond servant who will obey his Father's will without wavering. Jesus' supreme act of serving others is to lay down his life as a ransom for many. The ultimate act of self-sacrifice is when Jesus gives himself unto death to save us from our sins. Thus while the cross is an example to us of servanthood, Jesus' suffering upon the cross accomplishes something we never could through our own suffering. He will die as a ransom for many.

The metaphor Jesus uses, "a ransom" (*lutron*) is one of the most important terms to appear anywhere in the gospels.¹⁰ The meaning of the word has been variously interpreted throughout the history of the church. One of the most famous is the erroneous notion that the death of Jesus is some kind of a ransom which the Father pays to Satan, so that Satan releases control of the world back to God. This misses the fact that God owes Satan nothing. It also overlooks the Old Testament background to this idea. It is much better to understand a "ransom" as relating to the deliverance of slaves or prisoners of war, who are set free from captivity by a payment offered to secure their release. Such a ransom is closely tied to the

⁸ See the account of this in: F. F. Bruce, Peter, Stephen, James & John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

⁹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 381-382.

¹⁰ Peter G. Bolt, The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark's Gospel (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 71.

language of redemption and clearly implies that when Jesus dies upon the cross “in the place” of the many, he does so as the supreme act of self-sacrifice, in the stead, or in the place of the sinner.¹¹ Therefore, the term “ransom” is also tied to the idea of substitution.

Jesus’ death is therefore said to free us from our slavery and bondage to sin. Clearly Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 53 and the account of the suffering servant, as well as passages which deal with a guilt-offering (such as Leviticus 5:14-6:7, and which is our Old Testament lesson) are in the background here. When Jesus the servant offers himself to God as a guilt-offering, the effect is that we are released from our sins *because* our debt to God has been paid in full.¹² In these words, Jesus explains to the disciples *why* he must die. His death will not be the tragic outcome of a confrontation with the Sanhedrin gone awry. His death will not come about because the power of Rome is too much for him. No, Jesus is God’s servant, who will voluntarily lay down his life for our sins. His death, unlike that of any other person, is able to secure our release from that which enslaves us, namely, our sin. Jesus has just told his disciples why he must die. This will all become clear soon enough.

Mark records one final incident before Jesus reaches Jerusalem, and that is the final healing miracle in this gospel, the account of Jesus healing a blind man named Bartimaeus.

According to the very abrupt report in verse 46, “*then they came to Jericho.*” Jericho is to the west of the Jordan River, which means that Jesus has crossed the river back into Jewish territory. More importantly, Jericho is only eighteen miles from Jerusalem. It is here that Jesus encounters a blind man and a large crowd of people who were, no doubt, anticipating Jesus’ grand entry into Jerusalem. Mark sets the stage for the miracle which follows in verses 46-48. “*As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’*” Somehow this blind man had heard of Jesus. His relentless cry of faith, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me,” is framed in the language of the Psalter. This man believes that Jesus can help him and he simply will not give up, despite the crowd’s insistence that he do so. He calls out to Jesus over and over. He is desperate. And he just knows that Jesus can heal him.

Jesus heard his cries and will deliver him. As we read in verse 49, “*Jesus stopped and said, ‘Call him.’*” This was the greatest news imaginable for this poor man. The crowd did as Jesus asked, and “*called to the blind man, ‘Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.’*” Even the crowds knew what the call of Jesus meant for this poor man and they are excited to witness what was about to happen. Meanwhile, Bartimaeus did what the people told him to do. “*Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.*” Concerned with this man’s obvious plight, Jesus now examined him about why he called out to him. “*‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus asked him.*” Seeing this as his only chance to be healed, “*the blind man said, ‘Rabbi, I want to see.’*” Jesus’ reply was swift and decisive. “*‘Go,’ said Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you.’ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.*” Even though the man had never seen Jesus, he already believed that Jesus was the promised one (the Son of David). He believed that only Jesus could help him. His unwavering persistence

¹¹ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 343.

¹² Bolt, The Cross from a Distance, 71-75; Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 342-344; Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 383-384.

demonstrated as much. Now Jesus calls forth a reply—an expression of that faith which already was present in the man’s heart. Instantly the man was healed and joined Jesus and the others on the road. His faith will stand in sharp complete contrast to the hard-hearted unbelief soon to be expressed by the Sanhedrin when Jesus enters Jerusalem.

Mark’s account of Jesus’ messianic mission has now come to its final chapters. Israel’s Messiah was just eighteen miles from Jerusalem. He has just given sight to the blind, an act which proves that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah who is about to enter his royal city in all his messianic glory. The scene now shifts to Jerusalem as Jesus’ mission comes to its climax. Jesus is soon to lay down his life as a ransom for many.

What application can we take with us from this section of Mark’s Gospel?

Jesus has revealed to his disciples that he is Israel’s Messiah. He has shown them that great piety and zeal, wealth, and social standing, can do nothing to qualify men and women for entrance in the kingdom. Jesus has told them that the kingdom must be bestowed upon those who will receive that kingdom as little children. Now, as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, he tells the twelve that he will give up his life as a ransom for many. His death will set slaves and captives free. His death is the supreme act of self-sacrifice that Jesus has been talking about all along. Jesus’ death upon the cross is the act of utter self-sacrifice which becomes the model for the Christian life. Out of gratitude for what Christ has done for us, we are to serve others, even as Jesus died to save us from our sins. This is what Jesus meant when he spoke about taking up your cross and following him.

When Jesus and the twelve “go up” to Jerusalem, Jesus sets in motion a chain of events which will lead to his betrayal, to a sentence of death, to his being delivered over to the Romans, who will mock him and beat him, before executing him. And then, he will be raised from the dead. Jesus did this to obey his Father’s will and fulfill all the commandments of God. There was no other way for us to be saved. There was no other death which could save us. Jesus laid down his life as a ransom of many. And when he did, the guilt and power of sin was forever broken. Those of us who deserve God’s wrath, need never fear facing it. Why, because Jesus did this in the place of sinners. He took that punishment which we rightly deserve. This is what Jesus meant when he said, with God all things are possible. Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many.

Since Jesus did what we cannot do, we must cease trying to save ourselves and flee to the cross. We must simply receive (through faith) all that Jesus accomplished in his doing and dying. Here is the gospel in all its glory—what God demands of us under the law, he freely gives us in the gospel. Here is Jesus’ obedience and suffering laid out for us as plain as human speech will allow. And this alone, can save us from our sins.