

Notes on Mark 11—16

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Chapter 11

Jesus had taught that he would suffer. He connected this with Jerusalem and had amazed his disciples with how resolutely he walked to his sufferings (10:32). Now they were there. It seems that Jesus intended to fulfil Genesis 49:10–11 and Zechariah 9:9, by coming as King to Jerusalem. Whether everyone else understood this at the time, or later, is not clear, but Jesus certainly entered Jerusalem as its King. He was welcomed at least as a great prophet with the words of one of the Psalms usually used for entering Jerusalem for a feast (Ps. 118). Jesus also entered as priest and checked the functioning of the temple.

The next day must have been one to remember. Jesus took charge, as prophet, priest and king, appointed by God, correcting abuses, forbidding abuses and teaching the purpose of God's temple among the nations. He stayed all day and held the crowd in his hand. On the next day, Jesus was back, and was formally approached by the resident authorities. They should have listened to John the Baptist and received their Messiah. But they had not heeded God then, and Jesus would not give them further authentication.

The fig tree had made a pretence of having fruit, as did Israel, and, in being cursed and withering, became a parable for the disciples to consider. Therefore the point Jesus made was not about Israel but about their having faith to do likewise. They would not be able to exercise their prophetic ministry without the aid of an intervening God moving mountains. Nor would they be able to do so if they cherished enmity. The message they would bring was about forgiveness, not vengeance.

Prayer

Father, you have ordained that we should be saved by your Son. With all our hearts we welcome him now. May he do among us and in us all your good pleasure. You have sent him to purge us of false worship and to lead us to you as your true people. May the news of his reign and of your grace be clearly proclaimed wherever you please to take us, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter 12

The questioning of Israel's leaders (11:27) was not learning but judgment. Because they did not stand under the authority of God, they sought to establish their own. Jesus understood his place in the long line of prophets, but also as the rightful heir of all things and as cornerstone of all that God was about. Apart from him there would be no inheritance for any of us (Gal. 3:16–18) and no building of God for his praise.

Another questioner gave Jesus opportunity to show that he stood in right relationship with the civic authorities, and with God. With a pure heart, there was no reason for conflict. Another questioner provided occasion for Jesus to demonstrate (from the limited 'Bible' that Sadducees acknowledged) that he relied, not only on the Scriptures but also in the power of God to which they witnessed. Another questioner, more careful now, went to the centre of Israel's faith, that is, love for God and neighbour, and God's insistence on these things above all else. This man had not abused the law and seemed to remain under it. He could have learned some more.

He, with all of those listening to Jesus, could have gone further by considering the next teaching, that the Scriptures were pointing to a greater than David. Israel was in danger of their hope being defined by dreams of past greatness, rather than by promises of God in the mouth of his prophets. All Israel should have been looking for David's greater Son. In fact, her leaders were building a place for themselves and not for humble seekers of God. A poor lady taught Israel what was important. She loved, and gave all she had.

Prayer

Father, I come to you through your Son. He has loved you with all his heart, he has lived by your power and been raised from the dead. For his sake, Father, you have received all who have trusted in him. Receive me now, and grant that I may love with all my heart mind and strength, for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Chapter 13

The Lord had suddenly come to his temple to refine it (Mal. 3:1–4), but, as yet, the disciples could not understand that this physical temple must be the scene of Israel's judgment. Before long, their attention would be turned to the temple of Christ's body (14:58; 15:29, 38; cf. John 2:19–22), the new focus for true worship.

The disciples asked about Jerusalem's future, but the Lord spoke about nations. They too, in revolt against their Maker and Messiah, would see many troubles. All the earth would be brought to true worship (not death throes but birth pangs). Disciples should not be deceived by those who claimed to be the world's Messiahs and who thought they could stop these birth pains. Rather, disciples would be Messiah's spokesmen and they would suffer the world's spite but be aided by the Spirit in their testimony.

However, they should not be deceived about Jerusalem. It would no longer be the centre of God's testimony to himself (cf. Deut. 12:11; Acts 7:47–56), so when it was surrounded with armies, they should run. In fact, many believers in Christ did exactly this in 70 AD and were spared the awful fall of Jerusalem.

After this, it would seem that human history was in chaos, but Messiah would surely come to gather his chosen people. They should see the earth's struggles, not as chaos but as signs of Messiah's sure arrival.

The disciples and their generation would live to see the day when the temple was dismantled. Jesus encouraged them, and us, to be patient in waiting. So, they should

not just admire the appearance of worship going on in the temple but live in the action of Christ's bringing the whole world to true worship (cf. Isa. 11:9).

Prayer

Father, you have sent Christ to purify us as a people who worship you in truth. Nothing is sacred to you if it does not express this worship. Lord, hasten the day when all the earth lives to your glory. Set my affection on things that are above, where Christ is, and focus my hope on your Son. Have mercy on those who suffer in this world's present birth pangs and keep us patient as we wait for you. Amen.

Chapter 14

The two deeds here could not be more unlike each other. The chief priest and Judas conspired in stealth and betrayal and doing deals suited to their mutual interest. The lady who is probably Mary (compare John 12:1–8) poured out her love, and her family heirloom and served Christ in a way no calculation could ever do. He was awaiting death and received her act as preparation for that time. Jesus reasoned with the disciples (led by Judas) that they should not despise her act. Rather, they should emulate it.

Another servant of Christ was ready to host the Passover for Jesus and the twelve. In these dangerous times, a male water carrier identified his location with a pot, an unusual occurrence. (Compare a similar prearrangement in 11:1–7.) At the Passover, while the apostles wondered if their Lord thought of them as betrayers, he thought of them as covenant members and gave them, in a sign, his body and blood, and assured them of the coming feast in the kingdom. His relationship to them would be so sure that it would survive their frailty.

What made Jesus alarmed and distressed? The sorrows Jesus endured now were so great that he wondered if he would survive them. It was an 'hour' or a 'cup' to drink (cf. Mark 10:38; 14:41; John 12:27; 18:11). Jesus had often made it clear that he had to die, so what was this cup, and why was he unsure about drinking it? We can only wonder about the deep sorrows involved in bearing the sins of the world and be amazed at the weight on a human body in doing so.

Jesus asked, without success, that his disciples would pray as he did, so that they may not 'enter into' or succumb to their trial (as we pray in the Lord's prayer, Matt. 6:13). Remarkably, without their having succeeded in prayer, he said, 'Let us be going'. It was his prayers that would prevail (Luke 22:32).

Jesus said this time was the 'hour of darkness' (Luke 22:53), and this now manifested itself: secrecy, bravado, cowardice, false evidence, and bitter hatred. Its explanation is not in itself but that it fulfilled what was prophesied. The only clear word spoken was Jesus confessing he was Messiah and that he would come in glory. But what was intended for our salvation stirred up awesome rivalry.

Peter must have wondered where he stood. He had sided with this hatred and not with his Master's love. He had encountered his own heart. But would he not also have thought of the Lord who had predicted his conversion (Luke 22:32)?

Prayer

Father, the prayers of your Son have availed for me. His pains have become my joy, and his faithfulness has swallowed up my unfaithfulness. Together with your whole church, I receive the body and blood of your Son as my health and salvation. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ work in me a true love that no longer calculates but serves for the sake of Jesus your Son. Amen.

Chapter 15

Jesus had only one word for Pilate, affirming, in part, that he was king of the Jews. He was not king as Pilate understood it (and as the Jews had intended it to be understood) but as God had appointed him. Israel had wanted a political Messiah, and now, they had Jesus accused of being just that. But only the purpose of God mattered to Jesus and he was not concerned with defending any other issue.

Pilate was wise enough to see the jealousy that had brought Jesus to him. But he was not wise enough to avoid being manipulated. He still lived for this world and had to preserve his own interests in it. All Rome's brutality went into action as they treated Jesus as a foolish rival to Caesar.

Refusing a sedative, Jesus remained alert for his suffering. Commoners derided Jesus about building a new temple; leaders derided him about saving others. What irony that this is precisely what he was doing! What grace that he did not cease to be about his Father's business.

But the worst was that he was abandoned by his God. No joy set before him could lessen the extent of his sufferings. It could only equip him for it. Therefore in dying, the temple he was to build was anticipated by the ripping of the veil of the old one, and further the saving he would do was intimated in the word of a Gentile that this man must be God's Son. So, the story that began with a rending of the sky and God announcing his Son is concluded with the rending of the temple veil and a representative of Rome announcing his belief that this man was Son of God rather than his Emperor.

One of the Sanhedrin who had passed sentence was brought from his privacy to identify himself with the crucified Christ.

Prayer

Father, you have loved us. Christ has loved us. Nothing can separate us from this: not anything here or in the future, nothing in life or in death. Praise be to you Father, that your love has prevailed over our hatred and self-interest. Grant that the truth of Christ crucified to rescue lost humanity may touch the nations. Lord, to this end, make me your servant, for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Chapter 16

The two Marys and Salome concerned themselves with moving a stone and while they became terror struck with what they discovered, Jesus was alive and would prepare his scattered company of followers to understand what had happened and to be servants of the word.

The ending to the book that is not in the oldest ancient manuscripts still conveys what was commonly preached as the church proclaimed the gospel. Reports of Jesus' resurrection seemed unable to persuade others that he was alive. Jesus had to proclaim himself. He remonstrated with his disciples over this but still asked them to proclaim the good news everywhere. The work of grace he had begun would go on unabated, and so it did. Jesus ascended to the right hand of God and the good news went everywhere.

Prayer

Thankyou Father for the raising of your Son and for a gospel which is your power to save. Lord, our faith rests in your grace and strength. Your once crucified Son is at your right hand. Grant now that your word will reach those who hate you and those who care only for themselves. Confirm your word with the signs of your favour. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.