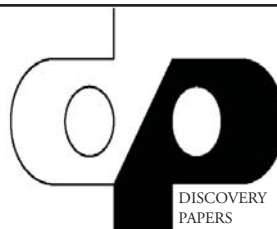


A DISCIPLE'S STORY

*SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK*



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Hello, my name is Simon Peter. Yes, that Simon Peter, the one from the Gospel of Mark. I'd like to share a few words with you about the way of the Lord.

For me, it all began one day when I, along with my brother, was casting a net in the Sea of Galilee. Jesus of Nazareth had been preaching that the kingdom of God—the rule of God—was drawing near. I had been waiting and hoping and praying for the advent of the kingdom of God, for God to act decisively to rescue us from our oppressors. Therefore, when Jesus approached us and said, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men,” he touched something deep within me. To be honest, though, I wasn't exactly sure what he meant. He spoke as if he were a revolutionary. I was a fisherman, a common laborer, and this sounded like an opportunity to get in on something big, something groundbreaking, something world-changing. It was heady stuff. I was hopeful that something of what I knew—fishing—would be used in this new venture. Jesus was calling me to something new, but not something completely new. I wouldn't have to become a fisher of men all by myself and all at once; he promised to make me become a fisher of men. So I left my nets—my life—and began following Jesus. In reality, I had no idea what I was getting into. The days ahead would challenge my most cherished preconceptions and turn my world upside down.

At first, following Jesus was more than what I had hoped for. In Capernaum, my hometown, he taught with amazing authority, cast out demons, and healed the sick, including my mother-in-law. He was generating quite a following, and we were off and running. Everyone wanted to get in on it. Then one morning, Jesus was gone. I hunted him down in a secluded place, where he was praying, and I complained, “Everyone is looking for you.” We were off to a great start, and I wanted to keep things going, but he said, “Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for” (Mark 1:38). That left me scratching my head. It wasn't the last time that Jesus confounded me. In fact, more often than not, he confounded me. Let me tell you, the way of the Lord is the way of being confounded. I found out that for Jesus, his message took precedence. His mission—at least at first—was that of an itinerate preacher heralding the arrival of the kingdom of God.

So, we headed out. Jesus preached about the kingdom of God, cast out demons, and healed the sick all over Galilee—indications, according to the prophets, that the kingdom of God was breaking in. Jesus sought to limit publicity, which at first struck me as odd. Shouldn't we let as many people as possible know what was going on? Problem was, none of us really knew what was going on. Also, Jesus was concerned that being inundated would hinder his ability to preach in the towns of Galilee.

Jesus also began to make some enemies among the nationalists, especially the Pharisees, and then I began to understand why we needed to stay on the move. If he stayed in one place, he would have been a sitting duck. He drew the ministry of the temple upon himself by offering forgiveness of sins, he hung out with those among our people who cared little for our laws, he disdained fasting, and he assumed a shockingly lax posture toward the Sabbath. For many of our people, especially the Pharisees, the Sabbath was not simply a day of rest; it was also intertwined with our national identity and hopes. For the Pharisees, keeping the Sabbath in a particular way was a sign of loyalty—to God, to Israel, and to national hopes for liberation from the Romans, the pagans who ruled our land. Jesus, though, acted as if he were trying to rescue the Sabbath from the Pharisees. I'll never forget the look Jesus gave the Pharisees before he healed a man on the Sabbath. He looked at them with a mixture of anger and grief—anger for what they had done to the Sabbath, grief for what they'd done to themselves.

The Pharisees believed that when God acted, he would act on behalf of the true Jews, the law-keepers. In fact, many of them believed that lawbreakers in Israel were holding back the arrival of the kingdom of God. The Pharisees saw Jesus as a lawbreaker who encouraged law-breaking. Some scribes, experts in the law, many of whom were also Pharisees, attributed the supernatural power that was undeniably at work in Jesus to an evil source. I must admit that I, too, was a little thrown off by Jesus' posture toward the law. I thought it a bit cavalier. Also, I thought he was casting our net too wide. By including the wrong people, we were making enemies in high places.

The nature of the mission

People began streaming to Jesus from all over, almost as if they were making a pilgrimage. Jesus was becoming a bigger deal than Jerusalem itself. Jesus, though, had something more in mind than catering to the multitudes; he had his mission in mind. That meant that he had us in mind. Jesus called twelve of us to be his disciples. All of us liked that number—twelve. There were twelve tribes of Israel, so we assumed that it was no accident that Jesus chose twelve. Maybe, we thought, Jesus was remaking Israel.

One day, he took all of us with him up to a mountain, and I guess you would say he gave us our mission. He appointed us to be with him, to be in relationship with him. He also sent us out to preach about the coming kingdom of God and to cast out demons. We had watched him preach and cast out demons throughout Galilee. Now, Jesus, said, it was our turn. You can't imagine how exciting this was. The twelve of us felt as if we were the leading edge of some great new movement of God. Also, Jesus treated us as if we were his family. In fact, when his flesh-and-blood family thought he'd gone off the deep end, he said to those of us who were sitting around him, "Behold, My mother and My brothers" (Mark 3:34)

To help us understand what he was up to, and to keep his enemies off balance, Jesus began speaking in parables, subversive, world-shaking stories about the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. Jesus was awakening our dreams for a better world but also redefining them. The kingdom was not coming as we expected, through normal channels with guns blazing; it was coming through Jesus of Nazareth with seeds casting. If the kingdom of God really were breaking into our world, then we thought that most of our people would see and believe, but the parables told us to expect rejection. The kingdom wasn't coming visibly or suddenly. The parables told us to wait for what we could not dream. We needed to be faithful—to cast our seeds, so to speak, and to believe that those seeds would grow into the consummation of the kingdom of God. We needed to listen—really listen—to the words of Jesus, not just assume that we understood him. To be honest with you, at first I heard what I wanted to hear and screened out the rest.

Travels in Galilee

Jesus even took us to the other side—that is, the east side—of the Sea of Galilee: Gentile country. I wasn't

happy about it. I didn't much care for Gentiles. It was sort of lost on me, and most of our people also, that we were supposed to be the light of the world. I became even less happy when we nearly drowned in a storm. Then, something amazing happened. Jesus spoke to the wind and the sea, and the storm abated. You have to understand, to us, the sea represented evil. Jesus, apparently, was shutting down evil. Demons had run from Jesus, and now even creation was submitting. We asked each other, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" (Mark 4:41). Our risky foray into Gentile country turned out to be only for one man, if you can believe it, a tortured soul from whom Jesus cast out a legion of demons. The man wanted to come with us, but Jesus wouldn't let him. (I was happy about that.) Instead, Jesus told him to tell his people, the Gentiles, about the God of Israel, and he went off and did so.

Back on our side of the sea, Jesus healed a bleeding woman and even raised a girl from the dead. Could it be, I wondered, that even death was being turned back? The woman had been bleeding for twelve years and the girl was twelve years old. There it was again: that number twelve. Both the woman and the girl must have represented our nation. Had we become unclean? Had we become dead in our sins? If Jesus healed these two people, maybe there was hope for Israel.

Jesus took us with him to Nazareth, his hometown. We expected the people of Nazareth to give him a hero's welcome; instead, they gave him the cold shoulder. I guess they couldn't get past the way they used to see him. Who he had become apart from their influence, not to mention his controversial message, must have challenged their view of the world. Shoot, he challenged my view of the world. I think the people of his hometown wanted him to keep his place so that they could feel safe. Jesus, like our father Abraham, had to go forth from his country, from his relatives, and from his house. Jesus was only able to heal a few sick people in Nazareth because of unbelief, but we ourselves, the disciples of Jesus, began to cast out many demons and heal many sick people. I began to see the importance of faith—the belief that the kingdom of God was breaking in to this world in and through Jesus of Nazareth.

Herod, the partially Jewish leader who ruled the regions Galilee and Peraea under the aegis of Rome, heard of what we were doing and became alarmed. Herod must have considered Jesus a threat. He even executed John the Baptist, who had aligned himself with Jesus. This was not good.

Feeding the multitudes, dogged by the Pharisees

Jesus decided we needed to come away with him for a while and rest. Remember, he commissioned us first of all not to preach, to cast out demons, or to heal the sick, but to be “with him.” A crowd of people, though, tracked us down. Jesus felt compassion for the people. To him, they were like sheep without a shepherd. Therefore, he taught them long into the evening. We told Jesus he should send the people away so that they could buy something to eat, but he told us to give them something to eat. Uh, with what? we asked. We had only five loaves and two fish—not even enough for us, really. But we gave it all away, and somehow—don’t ask me how—they all ate and were satisfied, and there was plenty left over. I surmised that Jesus wanted us to care for a needy world and that, if we trusted him, he would enhance our efforts.

Jesus sent us on ahead in the boat while he dismissed the crowd. Remember the storm that nearly swamped us? Well, another one hit us. We strained at the oars but made no progress into a fierce headwind. As if that weren’t enough, we then saw a ghost walking on the sea—or at least what we thought was a ghost. Turns out it was a man. A man? It was Jesus. He intended to walk on by and not help us at all. Really, I think Jesus just wanted to give us a glimpse into who he was and what he came to do. We saw him walking on the sea, which God conquered in the first creation and in the exodus. Jesus, in bringing the rule of God to earth, was effecting a new exodus and restoring creation. But my heart was hard, my mind was closed, and I didn’t understand. Mostly, I was just scared. When you capitulate to fear, it’s hard to apprehend the truth. When we landed, crowds of people gathered around Jesus. I think maybe they had more faith than we did, even though we were closest to him. Strange how that was.

The Pharisees, by and large, were not among those who believed. They challenged Jesus again, this time concerning his stance toward food laws and purity traditions. For the Pharisees and for many of our people, such laws and traditions protected us from being contaminated by Gentiles. They were signs of loyalty to God and nation. Jesus didn’t see things that way. The kingdom of God was breaking in, he said, and with it the beginning of the new age. In the new age, holiness influences what it touches instead of being contaminated by what it touches. In his view, the time was coming to move out and bless the nations. In any event, the problem, according to Jesus, was not unclean food or impure hands but unclean, impure hearts, and no law in the world could solve that problem. Jesus was effecting a new covenant—a new partnership—with God, which would do away with food laws

and replace them with the Holy Spirit, who works at the level of the heart.

Jesus withdrew from the Pharisees and took us to Gentile country, way up north, to Tyre, and then east, to Decapolis. In each place, he healed a Gentile. Remember when Jesus miraculously fed a large Jewish crowd west of the sea? Well, he did the same thing for a Gentile crowd east of the sea. The new exodus was sweeping up Gentiles, too. You might remember, if you’ve read Acts and Galatians, I was a little slow to catch on to these things, even after the resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit.

The Pharisees demanded that Jesus prove himself with a sign from heaven. Jesus, of course, refused. The only sign the Pharisees were interested in was one that endorsed their agenda. Such a sign Jesus could not provide, so he left them. In a sense, though, Jesus was concerned that the Pharisees hadn’t left us: he was concerned that we might be influenced by the Pharisees—and by Herod—to either reject the truth or simply flirt with it. When he spoke to us of “leaven,” he was speaking of influence, but we thought he was speaking of bread. For Jesus, getting bread he didn’t have into people’s mouths was easier than getting truth he did have into our hearts. It took me a long time to understand the worldwide nature of Jesus’ mission. As we were about to embark on our journey south, to Jerusalem, there was much I didn’t understand.

The way of the cross

I guess you could say I was blind. Just about then we met a blind man. Jesus healed him, but in a strange way. It was a two-stage operation. After Jesus touched him, he could see, but his vision was blurry. After Jesus touched him again, his vision became clear.

Once more, before the big trip south, Jesus took us north, this time to Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost point of our travels. On the way, Jesus asked us point blank, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29). There was much I didn’t understand, but I had seen enough to believe that he was the Christ, the leader that our people were waiting for. So I told him, “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29). Then he warned me and the rest not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. My sight, like the blind man after the first touch, was only partial. Jesus said he, as the Son of Man, would be rejected by our leaders and killed. Rejected? Killed? Come on! I, like most of our people, expected the Christ to be a ruler who would vanquish his enemies and lead us to victory. If he’s rejected and killed, then there’s no

way that he could be the Christ, I thought. I wasn't sure at the time, but I think I heard him say something about rising again after three days, but whatever he said, it made no sense to me. I tried to set Jesus straight, but he told me, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (Mark 8:33). Ouch. It's so easy, isn't it, to have a cause and to assume that your cause and God's cause are one and the same? Without knowing it, I was lining up against God's interests and lining up with Satan, the evil one. Like the blind man, I needed a second touch. Thank God for grace.

Jesus then told us, along with a crowd he summoned, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mark 8:34). The pagans dominated our land and enforced their brutal rule by executing, on crosses, those who rebelled against them. If Jesus was telling us to take up those crosses and destroy them, I was in. You might remember, if you've read the Gospel of John, that in Gethsemane, when the enemies of Jesus were closing in, I took up not a cross but a sword. Take up your cross? To be honest, I wasn't sure what Jesus meant. I would find out soon enough, though, and painfully enough. Jesus was not leading us in rebellion against Rome; he was leading us in rebellion against Satan. To take on Satan, Jesus insisted that we put away the sword and put on love. He wanted us to draw evil onto ourselves and take violence out of circulation.

Beloved, the way of the Lord, first of all, is the way of the cross. The way of the cross, the way of self-giving love, is the way of coming alive, becoming truly human, for Jesus tells you that you will save your lives if you lose them for his sake and for the gospel's sake. When you take up your cross, when you put on self-giving love, you come alive. To love is to be human.

Up on the mountain, down in the valley

I came to believe that Jesus was the Christ, but he rocked me by articulating a strange vision of what it meant to be the Christ and an equally strange vision of what it meant to follow the Christ. Then he took me, along with James and John, two other disciples, up on a high mountain, and his appearance changed: his garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as if he were reflecting, in a visible way, the glory of God. Elijah and Moses appeared with him. Don't ask me how I knew they were Elijah and Moses; I just knew. I was terrified. I didn't know what to do, but I figured I had to do something. Have you ever felt that way? I proposed the erection of tabernacles to honor the

presence of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Not a good idea. A cloud formed, and a voice spoke from the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" (Mark 9:7). Whose voice was this? Whose son was this? Was this the voice of God? Was Jesus his Son? Another title for the Christ was Son of God. Remember, I had just confessed that Jesus was the Christ and had gotten myself rebuked because I wasn't on the same page with Jesus. He had followed up the rebuke by talking nonsense about the nature of his mission as the Christ. In one moment, I was convinced: Jesus was the Christ. In the next moment, I wasn't sure. But if I was hearing things right on the mountain, the voice was telling me something. I had tried to set Jesus straight. Instead, the voice was telling me, I should be listening to Jesus.

When we came down from the mountain, there was a big commotion below. A father had asked the disciples who remained below to cast a demon out of his son, but they were unable. Earlier, when Jesus sent us out, the demons fled from us. After I professed my faith that Jesus was the Christ, it seemed as if the demons dug their heels in. The battle had been joined, and Jesus told us that special, focused prayer would be needed in the days ahead. Jesus challenged the father, pushing his faith to the edge by telling him, "All things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23). The desperate father answered with some of the most honest, vulnerable words I have ever heard: "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). I could have used such words instead of trying to set Jesus straight on the way to Caesarea Philippi and instead of suggesting that we erect tabernacles on the mountain. Although I didn't know it at the time, I was just as desperate for faith as that man. Jesus honored the father's faith and cast out the demon.

Jesus became more open with us about the destiny he envisioned for himself. Still, we didn't understand him. He was talking about being killed, and we were discussing among ourselves which one of us was the greatest. Jesus began to re-educate us. Really, he was just going over the earlier lesson in which he taught us to deny ourselves and take up our crosses. Jesus taught us that none of us in our group enjoyed any special status over the other and that our group enjoyed no special status over anyone who followed him from outside our circle. We were a fearful, insecure, arrogant lot, desperate for some shred of personal and collective superiority to which to cling. Turns out Jesus was about to begin his journey to Jerusalem to battle for the kingdom, and this was no time for us to be preoccupied with our status. Jesus said we needed to make painful sacrifices, beginning with cutting off and plucking out our love for position and place. We were trying to find ourselves, but we needed to lose ourselves for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Topsy-turvy values

Finally, we made our way south, to the region of Judea, where we met up with the Pharisees again. They tried to trip Jesus up with a question about divorce, a political hot potato. Jesus, though, seemed to indicate that the reason for our divorce laws, hardness of heart, was fading away with the advent of the new covenant, in which the Holy Spirit softens hearts. From our follow-up conversation with Jesus in private, I gathered that, from his perspective, marriage is so sacred—and so pregnant with possibility in the age that was dawning—that divorce coupled with remarriage was tantamount to adultery.

As we continued our journey toward Jerusalem, some people were bringing children to Jesus so that he might touch them. We deemed our mission too important to be sidetracked by children, so we shooed them away. Jesus was incensed. I'm not sure I've ever seen him so mad. We were preoccupied with our mission, but for Jesus, it was almost as if children were the focus of his mission. Children, Jesus said, have much to teach us about the kingdom of God. We needed to receive children and others of lowly status, not shun them. We ourselves needed to become like children and lose our concern for status; trust Jesus, like a child trusts his parents; and embrace his topsy-turvy values.

Just then, a man who owned much property ran up to Jesus, eager to learn what he needed to do to be part of things when the long-expected new age began. I thought, "Okay, this is more like it. We just had to make time for children to interrupt the mission, but this guy could finance it!" Most of us thought that the kingdom of God was for Jews who showed respect for our laws, and many of us thought that wealth was a sign of God's favor. Jesus told the man, however, to sell his possessions, give the poor, and follow him. Jesus discounted wealth as a sign of God's favor and seemed to replace loyalty to the law with loyalty to him.

When the man walked away, I was ticked at Jesus. If this rich, law-keeping Jew is on the outs, we wondered how does anyone get in? Jesus said no one—no one!—can get in without God's help. We all needed to confess human impossibility in order to accept divine possibility. We all needed to acknowledge the bankruptcy of adult suspiciousness, possessiveness, and pride and embrace childlike trust, receptivity, and humility. We needed to trust Jesus for his vision of the kingdom even as he was turning our world upside down and inside out, even as he was repudiating our notions of what mattered and what didn't. In other words, we needed to repent of idolatry and believe the

gospel.

At this point, I was looking for a little reassurance. If the rich guy couldn't accept Jesus' terms, but it's also nearly impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom of God, then I wanted to know, "What about us?" I, uh, informed Jesus, "Behold, we have left everything and followed you" (Mark 10:28). He said we were on the right track—following him—even if we were unclear about what following him meant, even if we had a long way to go and much to learn. We didn't understand that the gospel called for both Jesus and his followers to suffer or that what we had already received and what we would receive in the future—including a vast family made up of Jesus' followers—would more than make up for whatever we lost. Loyalty to Jesus was not only replacing loyalty to the law, it was also replacing loyalty to family. We needed to trust Jesus to teach us the rest of the way and to convert us into children who could trust and receive. He warned us that a good start doesn't guarantee a good finish. Okay, I guessed that his answer, on the whole, qualified as reassurance.

The way of the servant

As we drew closer to Jerusalem, Jesus became more specific with us about what he expected to happen once we got to Jerusalem: our leaders would condemn him and the Gentiles would kill him. I assumed that one of two things was true: 1) Jesus didn't know what he was talking about. 2) I didn't know what Jesus was talking about. I also assumed that I had to keep following him to Jerusalem to find out which was true. Jerusalem, I reckoned, would make or break us.

Certainly, James and John didn't know what they were talking about when they asked Jesus, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory" (Mark 10:37). We hoped that Jesus would be enthroned in Jerusalem, and James and John figured they might be in line for some plum appointments. We were now in danger of splitting into factions, ten verses two, just like Israel of old, which split into ten northern tribes and two southern tribes. In jockeying for position and squaring off against each other, we were acting more like Herod's cronies than Jesus' disciples. Jesus told us to concern ourselves with serving one another—and serving everyone—to diffuse the rivalries that were surfacing among us. He told us that even he, as the Son of Man, who receives from God an everlasting kingdom, came not to be served by subjects but to serve as a slave. Man! Jesus wasn't giving out seats of honor; he was giving his life so

that we could enjoy life in the new age, apart from Satan, sin, and death. As usual, we wanted too little—too little from Jesus and too little for ourselves. We needed to lose our concern for status, power, and privilege and become servants.

Beloved, the way of the Lord is the way of the cross. It is also the way of the servant. Those who walk in the way of the Lord absorb the anger of the world and commit themselves to serving others, all so that the world might be healed. The way of the Lord is the way of suffering, self-giving love. Remember, it is also the way of coming alive, the way of being truly human.

Remember the blind man Jesus healed just before the big trip south? We crossed paths with—or should I say we were interrupted by—another blind man, in Jericho, just a day's journey from Jerusalem. Bartimaeus, the blind man, identified Jesus as the Son of David, a title that many of our people associated with the coming Christ. I suppose that Bartimaeus was a lot like me: he professed that Jesus was the Christ, but he was blind. I had professed that Jesus was the Christ (though I was wavering a bit), but I was blind: I didn't know what it meant either to be the Christ or to follow the Christ. Momentum and anticipation were building as we, along with a crowd of pilgrims, began the final leg of our journey to Jerusalem, but Jesus stopped the train for a blind beggar. Jesus asked Bartimaeus the same question he asked James and John when they approached him: "What do you want Me to do for you?" (Mark 10:36). Whereas James and John had asked for seats of honor, Bartimaeus asked for his sight. Jesus healed him. I think Jesus wanted to do for James and John, and for me, what he did for Bartimaeus: he wanted to open our eyes. He wanted us to see what we could not see: the way of the Lord.

Making a mess of things

We were hoping that Jerusalem would enthrone Jesus as its king. Jesus, however, had predicted that he would suffer and be killed in Jerusalem. Two conflicting visions of the kingdom of God, ours and Jesus', were about to collide. Jesus made arrangements to approach Jerusalem royally but humbly: on a donkey. Finally, as we reached the top of the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem came into view, seemingly floating atop Mount Zion like a cloud. The pilgrims who were journeying with us for the Passover went nuts for Jesus, hailing him as the Christ. Hopes were sky high. As we approached the gates of Jerusalem, we were like those who dream. However, we were shocked, and

more than a little troubled, that none of the city's officials were there to greet Jesus when he passed through the gates. They snubbed him! Like many visitors to Jerusalem during the Passover, we lodged not in the city but in one of the surrounding villages. We stayed in Bethany and made the two-mile trip to Jerusalem each day until the Passover.

The next day, on our way to Jerusalem, Jesus decided to have it out with a fig tree, pronouncing on it some kind of curse. When we came to the city that day, he decided to have it out with the buyers, sellers, and moneychangers in the temple. By driving people away and throwing things around, Jesus put a stop to everything that was going on there. By acting the way he did and by alluding to the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, he was pronouncing God's judgment against the temple. Jesus spoke and acted as if Israel was shot through with corruption. Part of the problem, he believed, was nationalism, which prevented us from being the light to the nations and kept our temple from being what it was supposed to be: a house of prayer for all nations. When we had arrived in Jerusalem a day earlier, I thought we made a great entry. The pilgrims loved Jesus! Sure, the leaders of Jerusalem snubbed him, but I thought maybe he could win them over or that he could inspire a popular uprising to overthrow them. I failed to see how Jesus' display in the temple would serve those ends, however.

The next morning, as we were traveling from Bethany to Jerusalem, we passed by the fig tree that Jesus laid into the previous day. The thing had withered from the roots up! First he rips into a fig tree. Then he rips into the temple, speaking and acting as if it's doomed. Then the fig tree dies. I said, "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered" (Mark 11:21). The fig tree must have in some way symbolized the temple, because Jesus immediately began teaching us about prayer, faith, and forgiveness, which were central to the ministry of the temple. He began speaking to us as if our little group was, in fact, some new kind of new temple.

Leaders challenge Jesus

Members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council in Jerusalem, tried to expose Jesus as an imposter. Instead, he exposed them as hypocrites. Jesus told them a parable that depicted the leaders as spurning the love of God and as conspiring to kill the Son of God. He was warning them that if they proceeded with their machinations, God would destroy them and transfer the leadership of Israel to others who would fulfill her vocation to bless the world. In the

parable, Jesus not only anticipated his rejection, he also anticipated his vindication. The leaders got the point.

Next, the Sanhedrin sent to him a delegation comprising both Pharisees, nationalists who opposed Roman rule, and Herodians, collaborators who favored Roman rule. They tried to coax him to take a stand on a controversial issue, the census-based tax that Rome imposed on our people. The Pharisees opposed the tax and the Herodians favored it. Was Jesus a revolutionary or not? Either way, his enemies hoped to label him and discredit him with at least some of our people. In so many words—so many brilliant words, I might add—Jesus told them that the tax was inconsequential and that they were mistaken to make an issue of it. Forget about the tax, Jesus told them, and worship God. There were lots of issues, which I deemed important, that I had to forget about in order to worship God. Worshiping God also helped me put those issues to the side, where they belonged.

Did Jesus oppose the tax and favor the revolution, or did he favor the tax and oppose the revolution? Both and neither. He favored the tax, but not in the way that the Herodians favored it. He favored the revolution, but not in the way the Pharisees favored it. They couldn't pin him down as against revolution, for he favored revolution of a sort, nor could they pin him down as a threat to Rome, for Jesus took up no sword. Jesus, as I came to understand it, came to win the world not by killing his enemies but by dying for them. He rebuked both the Pharisees and the Herodians while simultaneously avoiding their trap. They left with their tails between their legs.

Next up: the Sadducees, who constituted the ruling class in Israel and dominated the Sanhedrin. With a vested interest in the status quo, they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, in part because such belief stoked revolutionary fervor among nationalists who were inspired to risk their lives because they expected God to raise them from the dead. Jesus stirred up the masses and thereby posed a threat to the status quo, so the Sadducees sought to discredit him for believing in the resurrection of the dead. They posited a ridiculous scenario that proved, in their view, the absurdity of belief in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus, though, by invoking the scriptures, said they were doubly mistaken, first because they didn't understand that the resurrection of the dead transcends marriage and second because they didn't believe in it.

Jesus was swatting down his enemies like flies. Problem was, they were getting as mad as hornets. I wondered: Were we winning or losing?

Finally, a scribe, one of the experts in our laws, who had overheard the previous exchanges, approached Jesus and asked him for an interpretation concerning which of God's commandments was the most important. Jesus, mining the scriptures, answered by citing three commandments: first to hear who God is, second to love him, and third to love others. Jesus was also suggesting, again, that the new covenant, which fulfills the law, was in the offing. The scribe agreed with Jesus and drew out the implications of his answer and even hinted that perhaps the temple was becoming irrelevant. The scribe was onto something. The new covenant, as we came to learn, cures hardness of heart, fulfills the law, and bypasses the temple. Jesus told the scribe that he was not far from the kingdom of God, first because the kingdom was imminent and second because the scribe had heard and accepted both Jesus and his words. Wow! A scribe who appreciated Jesus! A scribe whom Jesus appreciated! Maybe the scribe could influence other leaders to embrace Jesus. Maybe there was hope for us yet.

After fending off his enemies and perhaps winning a friend, Jesus turned his attention to a crowd that had gathered in the temple precincts. He said that the title Son of David served as an inadequate moniker for the Christ. As the Christ, Jesus was fighting Israel's battles for her, like David of old. However, in addressing the crowd, he was rehabilitating the Son of David title, because he, as the Christ, was fighting greater battles, not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of wickedness.

Jesus seemed particularly concerned to discredit the scribes as authoritative interpreters of the scriptures. He charged them with exploiting their reputations as religious experts in order to take advantage of widows, a particularly grievous offense according to the scriptures, which the scribes deigned to interpret for our people. Just as Jesus was emerging as the Christ, he urged the crowd to trust him, not the scribes.

After sitting down in the temple precincts, Jesus began observing the scene at the temple treasury. Many rich people were donating large sums of money, but Jesus took particular note of a poor widow who contributed two coins that together amounted only to the smallest denomination in Roman coinage. Quantitatively, the rich people gave more than the widow. Qualitatively, according to Jesus, the widow gave more than anyone else, including the rich people. Once again, Jesus turned conventional values upside down. What's more was less; what's less was more. Once again, Jesus adjusted my posture toward money.

The end of the temple

As we were leaving the temple, one of us took note of its magnificence. Jesus, though, wasn't impressed. He told us that the temple would be destroyed. When we first came to Jerusalem, he sort of acted out the destruction of the temple. All along, he had been drawing the ministry of the temple onto himself, acting as if he had the authority to forgive sins. In effect, we were a counter-temple movement. Still, I was surprised that Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God included the destruction of the temple. Our kings restored the temple; they didn't destroy it. However, in Jesus' view, the temple had come to represent opposition to God, not worship of God. I remembered that once before, some 600 years earlier, God raised up a pagan nation, Babylon, to destroy Solomon's temple because our people worshiped other gods. Our national story was reaching a climax, but in a paradoxical way. Our hopes—my hopes—were going to be subverted. Jerusalem was going to be destroyed, in order that Israel—true Israel—could be liberated. If the rebuilt temple was destined for destruction, we wanted to be ready for it. Therefore, four of us asked Jesus what we should be watching for.

Jesus told us to beware of false prophets and false Christs bent on revolution. God was giving birth to a new temple, the new people of God, and the coming events, including the destruction of the temple, were part of the birthing process. It would not be easy for us, though. We could expect to be beaten by Jewish leaders and to stand before Gentile rulers. Such persecution, though, would create opportunities for us to testify about Jesus. We could expect to be opposed by our families and hated by many, but Jesus urged us to persevere as his followers. The time would come, Jesus said, for us to flee Jerusalem. As Jews, naturally, we wanted to take up arms against the pagans and fight for Jerusalem. As disciples of Jesus, we needed to run from Jerusalem and let it fall.

Jesus used cosmic imagery to help us understand the spiritual significance of these events. Somehow, these events, culminating in the destruction of the temple, would be caught up in the enthronement of Jesus as the Son of Man. Remember, we had hoped that Jesus would be enthroned in Jerusalem. Instead, Jesus seemed to be saying, he would be enthroned in heaven. The destruction of the temple, in fulfillment of his prophecy, would serve as evidence of his heavenly authority. The influx of believers in Jesus from all over the world, in the face of overwhelming opposition, would provide further evidence that he was reigning over all the earth as the Son of Man, the Christ. If we listened to Jesus, we would be able to know enough in order to flee Jerusalem before the destruction of the

temple. However, Jesus didn't inform us of any specific date. Instead of making plans according to the calendar, we needed to stay alert and to stay faithful.

By the time Jesus was finished with his discourse, my head was spinning. I didn't understand everything he said, but I understood enough, and what I understood would sustain me when the events that Jesus predicted came to pass.

Eating together and shocking predictions

Back in Bethany, we were enjoying a nice meal together when a woman interrupted us and poured expensive perfume over Jesus' head. Pouring oil over someone's head was done in connection with hospitality, fellowship, and festivity. This woman, though, went over the top. She used not simply oil but perfume—and perfume that was worth about a year's wages. She didn't simply unstop or untie the vial; she shattered it. She didn't use just part of the perfume; she emptied the vial. Some of us scolded the woman for wasting the perfume when she could have sold it and given the proceeds to the poor. I thought the woman was out of line, especially because Jesus had earlier instructed a wealthy landowner to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor.

Jesus thought otherwise. He defended the woman. I just couldn't figure Jesus out. He'd confront two seemingly identical situations and respond completely differently. Jesus said the woman's critics didn't understand the nature of the occasion. The woman, he said, had anointed his body for burial. Only later, during another meal, the Passover, when Jesus broke bread and poured out wine and said that the bread was his body and the wine was his blood, did I begin to see the connection Jesus was making between the woman's extravagance and his presumed fate. Whenever people got a little too exuberant around Jesus—the blind beggar who shouted for him, parents who thrust their children into his presence, a woman who emptied a vial of perfume over his head—I became a little uncomfortable.

We returned to the city to eat the Passover in the guest room of an accommodating homeowner. By this time, Jerusalem was crawling with enemies, so the homeowner was taking a risk by sheltering us. Jesus shocked us during the meal by announcing that one of us would betray him. For us, sharing the Passover meal qualified as sacred fellowship, so if one of us betrayed Jesus, he would be guilty of the worst kind of treachery. I assumed

Jesus wasn't talking about me, but ever since he wrecked his arrival in Jerusalem by throwing things around in the temple, I didn't know what to make of him. When he announced that one of us would betray him, I felt as if he were probing my heart.

The Passover meal took another shocking turn when Jesus spoke not as if it related to the exodus story but as if it related to his story. Like Israel of old, which served Egypt, we were dominated by pagans. We longed for God to do what he did when he first formed us as a people and made a covenant with us: we longed for a new exodus and for a new covenant, in accordance with the expectations of our prophets. Jesus seemed to imply that he was effecting a new exodus and a new covenant in his own person. The bread was his body and the wine was his blood, he said. Exhilarated, terrified, and confused, I ate and drank. Strangest meal I ever ate—the Passover with Jesus and the other disciples.

After dinner, we left Jerusalem, but instead of returning to Bethany, as was our custom each night, Jesus stopped at the foot of the Mount of Olives, just east of the city. The break in the routine caused me concern. What, I wondered, was Jesus up to? He told us that all of us would all fall away from him. Oh my God! Betrayal by one? Disloyalty by all? Everything was coming unraveled. Someone had to put things back together. I had my doubts about Jesus, but no one could have accused me of disloyalty. I blurted out, "Even though all may fall away, yet I will not" (Mark 14:29). Jesus, though, responded with an even harsher and more particular prediction: he said I would disown him repeatedly before morning. I was intent on proving him wrong and said, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny you!" (Mark 14:31).

Arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus

Still at the foot of the Mount of Olives, we came to Gethsemane, where Jesus announced his intention to pray. He took me with him, along with James and John, the same three who saw his appearance change on the mountain. This time, his countenance changed. A look of panic came over his face, and he told us, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch" (Mark 14:34). Now I was really concerned. Jesus had always seemed so in control, and now he was falling apart. I wanted a leader who had all the answers, not a leader cracked under pressure. Jesus then left the three of us, fell to the ground, and began to pray.

So, what did I do? I cracked under pressure. Everything Jesus told me that didn't make sense finally caught up with me. I guess you could say I couldn't take it anymore. Too much sorrow. Emotionally, I checked out. Jesus told us to keep watch, but I couldn't even stay awake for an hour. James and John fell asleep, too. I was vaguely aware that Jesus went back and forth between his place of prayer and where he left us and that he spoke to us and that he even spoke to me directly, but I was in no shape to engage with him.

Just then, I heard the sounds of an approaching crowd. When I looked up, I saw Judas—Judas, one of the twelve!—leading a well-armed mob to us. Judas kissed Jesus. He kissed him! The treachery! Then they seized Jesus. And Jesus: Why did he stay in Gethsemane? Why didn't he fight? Why didn't he run? Where was God? Someone needed to do something! So I drew my sword and struck a blow for Jesus, a desperate blow for the kingdom. Mark didn't identify the swordsman, I suppose because I wasn't acting much like a disciple of Jesus. But it was me. We were outmanned and outgunned, and Jesus put up no resistance. I had no interest in getting myself arrested for being attached to a cause I wasn't sure I believed in anymore, so I ran. The others ran, too.

The mob took Jesus back to the city, to the home of the high priest, to face charges before the Sanhedrin. I gathered up my courage and tailed the mob. I wanted to get close enough to see the outcome of the proceedings while staying far enough away so that I could make a break for it if things got ugly. I still held out hope that Jesus would act or that God would act or that the leaders would change their minds or that they would fail. It was cold, so I inched my way toward the fire in the courtyard, hoping no one would identify me as a follower of Jesus. But a girl, a slave of the high priest, recognized me. What could I do? I had no interest in being arrested—and perhaps killed—for a cause I had serious doubts about. I professed ignorance: I lied. I distanced myself from the girl, but she tracked me down and fingered me in front of the bystanders. I lied again, this time before the bystanders, but they believed the girl, not me. I felt the need to intensify my defense, so I cursed, I took an oath, and I proclaimed, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" (Mark 14:71). Repeatedly and publicly, I disowned the man I pledged my undying devotion to earlier in the night: the man who ended up giving his life for me.

Then it happened. A rooster crowed a second time, and I remembered: earlier in the night, after I had pledged my undying devotion to him, Jesus told me, "Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times"

(Mark 14:72). Was Jesus the Christ or wasn't he? I had my doubts, so I had distanced myself from him. But if he could predict my downfall so precisely, how could he not be the Christ? What could I do now? I broke down and wept. I cried bitter tears. I wept a lot. Mark is right: when the rooster crowed a second time, I had only begun to weep. I was a broken man, a complete mess. I crashed into a harsh reality: Jesus was the Christ, but I had no idea what that meant. Thank God for grace.

There's not much more I can tell you that you can't learn from reading Mark, because I wasn't present for the scenes described in the rest of his narrative. The Sanhedrin handed Jesus over to Pilate, the Roman governor; Pilate ordered the crucifixion of Jesus; and Jesus died a brutal, shameful, lonely death. I might comment briefly on the end of the narrative, however. Three Galilean women on Sunday morning came to the tomb where Jesus had been laid, but the tomb was empty, except for an angel who told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. The angel told the women, "But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He told you'" (Mark 16:7). At first, as Mark says, the women, gripped by fear, said nothing to anyone. But, as you know if you've read Matthew, Luke, and John, the women told us the news. That Jesus specifically wanted to meet with me, after I had disowned him in the courtyard of the high priest, meant more to me than you can imagine.

Do you know something? I now think that it was necessary for me to fail. The way of the Lord is so confounding, so counterintuitive, and so contradictory to virtually everything I held dear that even though Jesus taught it and portrayed it and modeled it over and over again, I didn't get it. It wasn't for nothing that Jesus told me, "Get behind Me, Satan, for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (Mark 8:33). Even that rebuke didn't pry me loose from my worldview. The same words—"the kingdom of God," for example—meant completely different things to Jesus and me. My whole way of life—my conception of the world, my hopes for the Christ, my hopes for my people, my hopes for my own life—needed to die. Die it did—right there in the courtyard of the high priest. My way of life needed to die so that I could rise to walk in the way of the Lord. Jesus healed me. He raised me up. He opened my eyes and ears. He converted me into a child. True to his word, he fashioned me into a fisher of men. I learned to take up my cross. I learned to be a servant. At times, I wandered off course (again, read Acts and Galatians), but I learned to walk in the way of the Lord.

The way of the Lord

Beloved, the way of the Lord is the way of the cross: the way of putting away anger and putting on love, absorbing the evil of the world and giving back nothing but love. It is also the way of the servant: the way of detachment from status, power, and privilege. You ask not, "How can I get others to meet my needs?" but instead, "How can I meet the needs of the others?" Answering the second question, paradoxically, meets your needs, because what you really need is to serve others, not be served by them. In short, the way of the Lord is the way of suffering, self-giving love.

It is the way of the Lord because our Lord walked in it. He took up his cross; he came not to be served but to serve. By walking in the way of the Lord, by following it all the way to the end, Jesus defeated Satan, sin, and death. He inaugurated the kingdom of God—the healing, loving rule of God. Yet, there is more to come. Our Lord inaugurated the kingdom, but it has not yet been consummated. You live in the time between the inauguration and consummation of the kingdom. This is your time.

Our Lord calls you to be with him, in the context of a family-like community, and he commissions you to preach the gospel, to announce to a cynical but hopeful world that Jesus is Lord, and to authenticate such words by casting out demons, by challenging, with the love, power, and truth of God, the evil strongholds in your world that keep people enslaved. First and always, remain with our Lord: receive his love and share your heart with him in a community of believers.

If you walk in the way of the Lord, you will contribute to the healing of the world. Remember the parables. The seeds you cast for the kingdom will fructify in the new world. You can't begin to imagine what will happen to your heart when you realize, finally and surely, that God has used your labor on behalf of his eternal glory. Everything small done for the sake of the gospel grows to be big.

Don't think, though, that you can read the Gospel of Mark once, twice, a thousand times and figure out the kingdom of God or the way of the Lord. The kingdom is not a formula to follow but a mystery to be probed. Penetrating it requires spiritual diligence, attentiveness, and courage. The way of the Lord will be at turns both frustrating for its opaqueness and wondrous for what it reveals of God. If you follow where it leads, though, the Lord will take your breath away. For the way of the Lord is not only the way of the cross and the way of the servant; it is also the way of coming alive. When you walk in the

way of the Lord, you're connected—to God, to others, to a purpose beyond yourself.

We, the disciples of our Lord, followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem, and then from Galilee to the world. He taught us the way of the Lord each step of the way. He will also teach you and lead you out beyond, into the world, up mountains and down valleys, along straight-aways and around bends, until at the end you enter the gates of the New Jerusalem, the new heavens, and the new earth. Then, for all of us, the journey will begin anew. I can't wait to see you there.

Beloved, I commend to you the way of the Lord.

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