
Isaiah in Mark

Lesson 4

“Mark 3:7-35”

Objective: To understand how Isaiah is used by Mark to proclaim the good news to his original audience and to understand how this should be understood by us today. How should the gospel message impact our lives. The historical and cultural barriers often cause us to miss, or even misinterpret the message of Mark. This then inhibits transformation into the image of Christ.

Materials: Books, Journal articles, Targums, the Syriac Peshitta and interviews.

Procedures: To outline the issues that confront us as we seek to comprehend more fully the powerful ways that the Old Testament, and in particular Isaiah challenged and transformed the world-view and the lives of first century believers. In doing this, it is hoped that we can then transform that understanding into a contextual milieu that will allow our lives to be impacted by the Gospel in the powerful, transformative way that it impacted that first audience.

In addition to acting as the conclusion to 1:14-3:6, Mark 3:7-12 acts as a preview for the second major section of ministry described by Mark. There are two parts this first section of 3:7-12: verses 7-8 emphasize the scope of the popularity of Jesus, while verses 9-12 sound the major theme that will continue on from here, and others that will be introduced later. After a change of scene, an inclusio (“a great multitude”) sets the stage for the list of places where this “great multitude” originated. They are coming from Galilee, from Judea, from Jerusalem, from Idumea, beyond the Jordan and the region around Tyre and Sidon. There is some variation in the manuscript evidence of Mark, in this section, that indicates a concern on the part of the scribes who were transcribing it as well as some possible confusion. It is important to note that there is no punctuation in the earliest copies of Mark. This fact exacerbates the ambiguity of a passage like the one we have here. The subject, “a great multitude” (πολὺ πλῆθος - πλῆθος πολὺ) is repeated in this section and there are two finite verbs : “followed”(ἠκολούθησεν) and “came” (ἦλθον). The question is does the author intend for us to understand that Jesus had “followers” from all these places, or that he had

“followers” from Galilee and that the people from other places came out because of their curiosity, but then were not actually his followers?¹

This is an important question, and the textual variants here would seem to indicate that there was considerable scribal confusion over this issue. These variants also show that the early copyists of this Gospel recognized the importance of the word “follow (ἀκολουθέω), in the theology of Mark. Dowd says that, “The use of the verb and the presence, and activity, of the disciples in this preview reminds the audience that this is the life of a disciple-gathering teacher, not of an itinerant magician.”² This issue of being a “follower” of Jesus is an important one for a number of reasons. The whole issue of Jews and Gentiles comes into this issue. One of the questions here, is whether, or not, Mark is designating some of the disciples of Jesus as coming from Gentile regions. This will be an issue that is not really settled until much later and would seem to be counter to another passage of Scripture, particularly the woman in the region of Tyre who had a demon possessed daughter (Mark

¹ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), p. 29.

² Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, p. 29.

7:24-30). It is most likely the case that the disciples of Jesus are not being shown here as coming from among the Gentiles.

It may be the case that Jesus does indeed have disciples (followers) from each of these regions and yet they are still Jewish. The people of the region of the Idumaeans were forcibly converted to Judaism during the Hasmonean period (140-37 B.C.) and there were substantial minorities of Jewish people in the Transjordan cities, and even in Tyre and Sidon. Some commentators at least believe that the point being made by Mark here is that people were coming from all of these places in order to be disciples of Jesus. We cannot be certain, but it is also highly likely that Mark wishes to suggest that people from a wide geographical area are hearing of Jesus and being attracted to him. Most of these places had been under the control of Israel at one time or another with the exception of Tyre and Sidon which had never been a part of Israel. The list may be partly designed to foreshadow the post-Easter expansion of the Gospel into Gentile areas. This would be even more likely if Mark's audience were predominately located in one of these areas. Some have suggested that he is writing to a community primarily in the region of

Tyre and Sidon.³ France seems to reject such a perspective indicating that what is in view is simply how far the reputation of Jesus had spread. There is no real indication of the demographic makeup of this early phase of the ministry of Jesus. It is perhaps noteworthy that areas that were off-limits to most Jews such as Samaria, and the Decapolis, are not in the list though in the geographical region where Jesus is ministering.⁴ To me it would seem unlikely that Mark means for us to understand that Gentiles are becoming followers of Jesus here. If that were the case you would expect Mark to make that very apparent, as this would be a really big thing. They would likely have stoned Jesus earlier had this been the case and you would have expected the Pharisees and the scribes to make this accusation if it were happening.

At verse 9, Jesus tells his disciples (μαθηταῖς) to have a boat ready for him in order that he not be crushed by the crowd. The boat here seems to be for the protection of Jesus because the people that are hoping to be cured are pressing hard upon him. They see in Jesus

³ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, in The Anchor Bible series, Vol. 27 (New Haven CT: The Anchor Yale Bible, 2005), p. 260.

⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, in The New International Greek Testament Commentary series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 154.

hope; hope that they can be relieved of that which is causing them suffering. It is noteworthy here that there is an association of the large crowds around Jesus not because of his teaching, but because of his power to perform miracles of healing and the removal of demons from those that are possessed. In spite of this focus, some teaching does come from an unlikely, and even unwelcome source, from the demons themselves. At verse 11, whenever the unclean spirits see Jesus they fall down before him and proclaim that he is the “Son of God.” In some ways this is reminiscent of Philippians 2:9-11.⁵ Some have seen this as perhaps a precursor of what is described there. Such a view would be in alignment with a view of the authority and kingship of Jesus as the Son of God.

It is of interest, that Jesus not only does not seem to be interested in their testimony regarding his identity, but seems downright determined not to tolerate it. The purpose of Jesus in silencing the demons is likely twofold: first, in order to demonstrate his authority over the forces of Satan; second, because the demons

⁵ **Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**

are inappropriate heralds of the mission of Jesus. Jesus will reveal his identity in his own time and in his own way and he certainly does not need, or desire, the help of the forces of evil.⁶ It is noteworthy that the demons appear to be displeased with Jesus and yet even in their displeasure they cannot help but being obedient and complying with his commands. Later, the scribes will slander Jesus with the claim that he casts out demons by Beelzebul (3:22). Here, though it is apparent that, far from being collusion with these forces, Jesus is in the process of vanquishing them through the power of God. Even though there appears to have been no expectation that the Messiah would exert power over demons as an exorcist, from Jewish traditions, or sources, Jesus demonstrates that he participates in God's sovereignty over evil supernatural forces in the account of Mark's Gospel.⁷

The refusal of Jesus to allow the demons to announce who he is does not make much sense from a historical perspective, since according to verse 11 the demons are crying out persistently and

⁶ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2014), p. 155.

⁷ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 261.

loudly. It is likely that others besides Jesus will have heard their cries. The prohibition rather reflects Mark's messianic secret motif; according to which the divine sonship of Jesus is hidden from the realm of human knowledge until the crucifixion and the resurrection make it clear in which way it is to be understood. In addition, the place of honor to proclaim this message has not been reserved for either demons, or the angels of heaven, but for those chosen for the task. They will be revealed in the next passage as those who have been designated for this divine purpose of revealing this message.⁸ This then sets up the commissioning of the twelve that will follow in 3:13-19.

With verse 13, the second major section in the Gospel now begins and will go through to 6:6. This section, like the first, begins with a commissioning narrative and then the passage concludes with the naming of the twelve. Jesus designates these twelve as "apostles" (ἀποστόλους). It is not certain whether he calls disciples to the top of the mountain and then chooses twelve from the group, or if he calls only the twelve to the mountaintop. Either way, we are

⁸ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, pp. 261-262.

left with those who are to be sent out to proclaim the message and to have authority over demons. It seems probable that when Mark describes the ascent up the mountain he has in mind the ascent of Moses up Sinai (Exodus 19, 24, 34; Numbers 27; Deuteronomy 9-10, 32). In the Old Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) the phrase that Mark uses for going up the mountain (*ἀναβαίνει εἰς τὸ ὄρος*) occurs twenty-four times, of which eighteen are in the Pentateuch and most of these refer to Moses.⁹

The appointment of the twelve represents a very important narrative marker in the account of Mark. From this point on, these disciples will be continually at the side of Jesus, learning from him, sharing in his ministry, learning to be like him. They will be the insiders who will be the recipients of special insight into who Jesus is and they are set in contrast to the “outsiders,” Israel’s religious leaders, the people of Jesus’ hometown, and even the members of Jesus’ own family. Despite the fact that the disciples are insiders they too will play a primarily negative role in Mark’s narrative, by continually failing to comprehend the message and mission of Jesus

⁹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, pp. 265-266.

(4:13, 40; 6:37, 52; 7:18; 8:4, 17-21, 32-33; 9:18-19, 31-32, 38-39; 10:13-14, 35-45). They are not the heroes of the story; Jesus is, and the call narrative here is more about Jesus and his mission than it is about the outstanding qualities and character of those who Jesus calls. The number twelve, especially when seen in connection with the proclamation of the kingdom of God, indicates the reconstitution and restoration of eschatological Israel. Jesus has begun to gather to himself the end-time people of God. The twelve are the first of those who are called and they will become a light to the nations as Israel was prophesied to be by Isaiah the prophet.¹⁰ **Isaiah 12:3-4 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4 And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.**¹¹

At verse 20, we have a change of scene. This unit consists of material related to the misunderstanding of Jesus by his blood family and their replacement by “those who do the will of God.” This section will have likely served as a great consolation to those early Christians who were rejected by their families because of their

¹⁰ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, pp. 162-163.

¹¹ Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:3.

conversion. In this, they follow the pattern of their founder, Jesus. According to the view of the family of Jesus he was out of his mind and they have come to take charge of him. When Jesus is informed that his family are outside he uses this opportunity to redefine family. Jesus forms this redefinition around the lines of vocation rather than according to blood and in doing this the importance of family is revitalized. The emphasis that is given in the Markan account is twofold: 1. Doing the will of God will appear to be insanity to some people and often to one's own blood relatives. 2. Those whose relatives misunderstand them will find new relatives in the Christian community, just as Jesus did. Those that are true kin, act according to the will of God. In this way Jesus reverses the tables and instead it made apparent that it is those who do not do the will of God that are the ones who are out of their minds.¹²

In this section, Jesus provides powerful teaching not only about his ministry but about the will of God. God wishes for people to be freed from demons and to be healed. This is the clinching argument in the rhetoric of the controversy here. That rhetoric is

¹² Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, pp. 33-34.

designed to inform the readers that Jesus, and his followers, are not magicians. There is a foreshadowing of the passion narrative here, because in the trial of Jesus there will be accusations not that he did not do miracles, but that they were done using the power of Beelzebul and not through the power of God. The audience of Mark will have understood that the accusation of the scribes, that he performed his miracles by the power Beelzebul, meant they were making an accusation of practicing magic against Jesus. Jesus clearly understands that this is the charge here, and he responds to their accusations. He first does this by using a mocking question: ““How can Satan cast out Satan?”¹³ The question is meant to expose the illogic of a kingdom being divided against itself. It is in the interest of a ruler to maintain unity and counterproductive to introduce disunity.

The next point requires us to understand that the pervasive theme of Yahweh-Warrior imagery in Isaiah is used here. That theme is being used here is now widely accepted by scholars. This is seen in Isaiah 40, 51 and 52. This introductory motif continues in Isaiah as Yahweh is presented as a mighty warrior and man of war (Isaiah

¹³ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, pp. 34-36.

42:13-15; Exodus 15:3). Just as Yahweh had crushed the might of Pharaoh at the sea, so he will again deal with the oppressors of Israel (Isaiah 43:16ff.; 51:9ff.). Yahweh fights for Israel and as the coming of the good news delivered by Jesus comes we have the kingdom of God encroaching upon, and defeating the forces of evil. Here at 3:22-30, we find the beginning of the encroachment of Yahweh into the domain of Satan. Jesus defeats the forces of evil as he fights for Israel, in order to free them from evil. The central element in this section is that Jesus is accused of being possessed by Beelzebul and only with a right perspective is Mark's audience able to see that instead Jesus represents Yahweh as the divine warrior prophesied by Isaiah.¹⁴ Jesus responds to their accusation and demonstrates that the charges are not only false they are also illogical. Only those who are blind cannot see that Yahweh is at work in the ministry of Jesus.

This draws our attention back to Mark 1:10 and following, and the fact that Jesus could indeed not be possessed by a demon as he is in-dwelt by the Holy Spirit and at a stroke this refutes the charge that occurs here. Given that Jesus is not empowered by Satan and is

¹⁴ Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2000), pp. 140-152.

clearly plundering his house, then it should be apparent who is the stronger one. Several commentators, see here in Mark, an allusion to Isaiah 49:24ff.,¹⁵ and also perhaps the spoils-of-victory imagery of 53:12.¹⁶ It may indeed be harder for us to see the connection here, but the language in the Old Greek version (The Septuagint), shows parallels with the text here in Mark, particularly those that deal with the idea of the “strong man.” Jesus is here presented as the stronger one, who after binding Satan, is spoiling his kingdom and releasing the captives. This perspective lends itself well to the argument of Mark here. Mark tells this story in order that all flesh may know of Yahweh’s warrior activity and that Jesus brings the salvation of Yahweh to his people as promised. The linking of Isaiah 49 and Isaiah 63 ff. provides a coherent setting for the warning against blaspheming

¹⁵ **Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued? But thus says the LORD: Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued; for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.** NRSV

¹⁶ **Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.**

the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 63:10, is particularly relevant to the idea of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament.¹⁷

Isaiah, in 63:10 recalls how Israel, despite the gracious Exodus deliverance for their benefit responded by grieving the Holy Spirit. The advent of the kingdom of God has begun and there is a warning here in Mark 3 that there is still the potential for disaster. To reject Jesus is to reject the kingdom (Mark 1:14 ff.). At this point, Mark's introductory warning should not be far way from our focus. It is important to keep in mind that the casting out of demons and unclean spirits is mentioned more than any other type of miracle, or healing, in the individual accounts of Mark. This emphasis is extremely important as it indicates the implications of the beginning of the eschatological conflict between Israel's oppressors and Yahweh.¹⁸ This indicates the source of the oppression of the people of God. It is primarily from the forces of evil and this is the point at which Jesus makes his first encroachments into the camp of the enemy. Jesus is the strong man plundering the house of Satan, his

¹⁷ **But they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit; therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them.** NRSV Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, pp. 150-152.

¹⁸ Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, pp. 152-156.

kingdom is beginning to crumble for those that are not blind to seeing it.

Jesus, having decisively refuted the accusation against him that he was performing his miracles, and in particular driving out demons through the power of Beelzebub now moves to the offensive (3:28-30). It is not he who has sinned by making a pact with Satan, but they who have committed the unforgivable sin by their false accusation. This offensive begins with Jesus highlighting the coming of the forgiveness of sins. This forgiveness is offered to those who are downtrodden and have been under the dominion of the accuser, but for those who sin against the Holy Spirit, there will be no forgiveness. This qualification is not surprising in light of the context of Jewish traditions. Judaism was very familiar with the idea that there were certain sins that were not going to be forgiven. “God has appointed means of atonement for every transgression, except the intention to reject God and his covenant.” Such an intention is demonstrated particularly through the profanation of the name of God. Mark 3:28-30 fits into this same type of Jewish theology of atonement: “all sins are forgivable except that of blaspheming against

the Spirit, i.e. rejecting the ultimate revelation of God's will (in Jesus)".¹⁹

Some might question why Jesus indicates that there is some sin that is unforgivable? Does he do it because it is a genuine possibility, or is he here just trying to scare his audience? It appears to fit into the context of the Gospel message that he sees a genuine danger and warns his audience of this genuine danger. The idea of universalism seems totally alien to Jesus as it would to the rest of those within Judaism. Universalism is a modern view that is both naive and dangerous in that it provides false hope and assurance where there is none. Only those who are prepared to submit with the totality of their heart to the kingdom of God and his merciful forgiveness have an opportunity to be a part of the kingdom. Those that choose to align themselves with Satan and perhaps even blindly claim to be neutral the result is the same. They reject God and his forgiveness, and in doing so the consequences are that they will follow their master to their destiny. His punishment will become their punishment. “ **...but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit**

¹⁹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, pp. 283-284.

can never have acquittal, but is liable to the penalty of an eternal fault.”

At verse 31, we return once again to the dialogue regarding the family of Jesus. Unfortunately, in this context the family of Jesus does not seem to be among those who are “doers” of the will of God.

Jesus uses the opportunity to once again focus attention on being doers of the word of God rather than just those who hear it. Doing is critical. Doing aligns one with being faithful as a covenant partner with God who even now, in the ministry of Jesus is demonstrating his covenant faithfulness as he fulfills the words prophesied through the prophet Isaiah. Those that belong to the family of God are those that do “the will of God.” These are those for whom the message of Mark is good news. Certainly there is no sense that Mark wishes to exclude anyone who does not exclude themselves through their attitude and their alliances. Arrogance and the pursuit of power, and selfishness, even if it means making alliances with Satan puts one in opposition to the kingdom of God and thereby makes that person unable to receive the good news. The call of the Gospel is a call to change one’s heart in order to allow the kingdom of God to enter and take control there.

This is the true battleground. This is also why the weapons that are so often employed in the struggle are ineffective. Hearts and minds are not won through force and coercion but through mercy, love, and understanding.

Synopsis

The first part of 3:7-12 emphasizes the scope of Jesus' popularity while the second part, verses 9-12, set the stage for the major theme that will start here and go to the end of the book, continually noting the encroachment of the kingdom of God. As we see the popularity of Jesus growing and his appointing of disciples, so also will the opposition to the ministry of Jesus grow as well. In this section, the threat from his popularity is more dangerous to his well-being than the threat from his adversaries. He is so popular that he is in danger of being crushed. In time, that will change, but even in this section we can already see the growing opposition coming from the scribes from Jerusalem.

As Jesus ministers, the demons proclaim who he is and Jesus commands them not to speak. As accusations are put forth that Jesus does this by the power of Beelzebul he will counter these claims with arguments showing how ridiculous this it is that he is driving out demons by the power of the prince of demons. At the same time, he will introduce teaching designed to guide his audience to the truth, that the kingdom of God is coming and as its

agent he is overpowering the dominion of Satan. In the midst of all of this Jesus will appoint the twelve disciples who indeed will be given the task of proclaiming who Jesus is to the world, not angels of heaven and not certainly not demons.

From this, he goes on to warn those making false accusations about him that they are in danger of being guilty of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, since this is the source of his power. To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is to put oneself in danger of an eternal sin; and making oneself beyond forgiveness.

In this section Jesus will also redefine family in terms of those who are obedient to God. Those who are obedient to God are those that are the family of God and not those who are blood kin.

Questions

1. Why do you think people are initially attracted to Jesus in this section? In the world today?
2. Who today can you think of who is so popular that they might be crushed? How are they the same, and how are they different from Jesus?
3. Why do you think Jesus refuses to allow the demons to tell people who he is, after all it is the truth?
4. Why do you think Jesus chooses Judas as one of the twelve?
5. What do you think it means for the disciples of Jesus to “proclaim the message?”
6. Why do you think the family of Jesus went out to restrain him?
7. Why do you think the scribes accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul?
8. Why do you think Jesus responded to the accusations of his accusers?
9. Why do you think a person will not be forgiven for blaspheming against the Holy Spirit?
10. Do you think people in the world today are proficient at determining the difference between good and evil? Why, or why not?

-
11. What is an unclean spirit?
 12. Why do you think Jesus responds as he does when he is told that his mother and brothers and sisters are outside?
 13. What does it mean for people to be family?
 14. How is the church like family, and how is it not like family?
 15. What does it mean to do the will of God?