



grow. pray. study.

September 21, *The Last Words*

The shadow of death early in Jesus' ministry

MONDAY 5.22.25 Mark 2:1-11, 3:1-6

In Mark's gospel, death's shadow hung over Jesus from nearly the start of his public ministry. As he openly forgave a sick man's sins, some legal experts said, "He's insulting God. Only the one God can forgive sins." In chapter 3, Jesus' determination to heal on the Sabbath (ignoring rabbinic tradition) led the "righteous" Pharisees to an alliance with Herod's corrupt supporters to destroy Jesus. It was only the third chapter of Mark's story, and Jesus' enemies had decided he needed to die.

- Some Christians erroneously think Jesus' death was the only thing that "allowed" God to forgive sins. But Jesus didn't tell the paralyzed man, "Come back after I've died—THEN I can forgive your sins." And Israel's God had always said forgiveness was a central part of his character and covenant (cf. [Exodus 34:5-7](#)). How did Jesus' death dramatically show God's eternal willingness to forgive, rather than creating a "legal" basis for forgiveness?
- Rigidly pious people, ready to criticize Jesus for healing a man's withered hand, made the Savior angry. Couldn't Jesus have just told the man to meet him in secret the next day? In this and other stories (e.g. [Luke 14:1-6](#), [John 5:1-18](#)), Jesus seemed to go out of his way to show that he valued people's well-being more highly than strictly following rules. Do you believe that principle applies in some fashion to any of today's "we've never done it that way before" arguments?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for caring about my body and inner self's well-being. Help me to live each day in the beautiful reality of your forgiving, restoring grace. Amen.

Jesus' death: the ultimate act of service

TUESDAY 5.23.25 Mark 10:35-45

James and John upset the other disciples by asking for the highest posts in Jesus' [earthly] kingdom (which they anticipated). Jesus didn't just say they should go through proper channels. He said the human, status-seeking model they had in mind completely missed the nature of his kingdom. Jesus defined greatness, not as high position, but as service. He said serving others is the path to greatness in his kingdom, and that "giving his life" would be an ultimate act of service.

- "To liberate many people" is from the Greek *Lutron*, often rendered "ransom." Taking the "ransom" idea too literally (e.g., "Who did he pay it to?") misses the point. Scholar William Barclay wrote, "This saying of Jesus is a simple, pictorial way of saying that it cost the life of Jesus to bring men back from their sin into the love of God. It means the cost of our salvation was the Cross of Christ." * How does it speak to your heart to see Jesus' readiness to serve you, to win you to God's love?
- Mark 10:45 probably showed Jesus applying [Isaiah 53](#) to himself (he also did that in [Luke 22:37](#)). "God's power is at its greatest not in his destruction of the wicked but in his taking all the wickedness of the earth into himself and giving back love." * What does Jesus' way of defeating evil as the Suffering Servant tell you about how God's power works?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, let my way of life grow from a desire to serve people, not from a desire for power, privilege, or praise. Amen.

* T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, ed. *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, p. 222.

Dying AND rising—the only way to defeat death

WEDNESDAY 5.24.25 Mark 9:30-32, John 14:1-3, 8-9, 19

Jesus worried his disciples when he spoke of dying, or going away. He pledged to return (alive after his death, and again at the end of human history). He told them God's house is spacious, with plenty of room for everyone—they could always be with him. He told them that in him, they'd seen the Father. He linked his dying and rising to our hope of life beyond death—"because I live, you will live too." He said those who trust him have eternal life—present tense ([John 3:36, 5:24, 6:47 and 54](#)).

- Jesus' teaching was direct: "He is simply trying to tell them what he can see is going to happen. He will be handed over; he will be killed; he will rise again. Why couldn't they understand?.... nobody at all believed that, if and when God did send one, that Messiah would have to suffer, still, less have to die." * How do you keep your mind and heart open to however God works, whether it fits your expectations or not?
- Jesus promised that, after he died, he would rise, and then when he returned his followers would always be with him. "Heaven" is not an abstract subject—it's about whether we believe Jesus' promise. Pastor Hamilton wrote, "I ask you a simple question: What do you trust in? When you strip away everything else, what is it—at the bedrock of your life—that you trust in?... Christ calls us to trust in him, to count on him." ** How do you answer that "trust" question?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you succeeded through self-giving love, through a cross that somehow gives me life. Reshape any flawed notions of success I may have and help me to seek success by the same divine standards that you did. Amen.

* N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 123.

** Adam Hamilton, *John: The Gospel of Light and Life*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, p. 97.)

Trying to correct Jesus' "negative thinking"

THURSDAY 5.25.25 Matthew 16:16-26, John 13:3-15

The disciples' answer to Jesus' question ("Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets") was no insult. Those were great, respected names. But Jesus' disciples struggled when he spoke of dying and rising again, or when he took a slave's role washing their feet. "In this period [Jewish people] did not normally expect the Messiah to be martyred.... Jesus' disciples expected to follow him to the kingdom—not to martyrdom." *

- Scholar N. T. Wright showed why Peter tried to correct Jesus. "The way to this kingdom is by the exact opposite road to the one the disciples—and especially Peter—have in mind.... Jesus will indeed confront the rulers and authorities, the chief priests and legal experts, in Jerusalem; but they, not he, will appear to win the battle. He will then be raised from the dead, so Jesus says, but neither Peter nor the others can figure out for the moment what he might mean by this." **
- Peter, like almost all first-century Jews, expected a conquering Messiah, a figure of intimidating power. That made it hard for him to grasp Jesus' teaching about his self-sacrificing mission. What assumptions about life, success and greatness do you have that make it harder for you to accept Jesus' teaching about a truly great human life? What has helped you move beyond those inherited assumptions?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, transform me so that I see life as you do. Give me the inner strength to follow and trust you, so that I can pray, with Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well...and all manner of thing shall be well." Amen.

* NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, eBook (Kindle Location 226630, 226642). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

** Wright, N. T., *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2* (p. 9). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

“I give up my life for the sheep...so that I can take it up again”

FRIDAY 5.26.25 John 10:14-18

John wanted his readers to know Jesus didn't stumble into his saving death by chance but chose that course (verses 17-18). Talking about himself as a shepherd, Jesus “declares that violent death is not just a dangerous possibility; it's his vocation. The best explanation of why is found in... this very down-to-earth picture of the shepherd and the sheep. The sheep are facing danger; the shepherd will go to meet it, and, if necessary, he will take upon himself the fate that would otherwise befall the sheep. In Jesus' case, it was necessary, and he did.” *

- One thing all four gospels made a point of is that Jesus intentionally went to Jerusalem before that fateful Passover ([Matthew 16:21](#), [Mark 10:32-33](#), [Luke 9:51](#), [John 12:12](#)). John even showed that the disciples knew this wasn't, humanly speaking, a good idea ([John 11:8, 16](#)). But Jesus went, not for himself but for the sake of his “sheep,” the ones already in his flock and all the others he wanted to reach (verse 16). When have you sensed that you matter that much to Jesus?
- Here, as in the passages we read yesterday, Jesus said his death would not be the end of the story. In today's reading, he linked dying and rising even more closely: “I have the right to give [my life] up, and I have the right to take it up again.” That's why, in the next chapter, he would make the powerful statement that “I AM the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). Does it make sense to you that the Creator of life would be able to give it up and take it up again?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I choose to trust you to be my shepherd. Shelter me, care for me, and guide me to the truly good life—a life shaped by your self-giving love and example. Amen.

* Wright, N. T., *John for Everyone, Part 1* (p. 151). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

The drawing power of Jesus' self-giving death

SATURDAY 5.27.25 John 12:20-26, 28-33; Mark 15:39; John 19:30

When Greeks asked to see Jesus, Jesus said he was about to be “glorified.” But he used “glorify” about what the Romans saw as the most humiliating death they could invent! As scholar William Barclay put it, “Jesus says: ‘The hour has come when the Son of Man must be glorified’.... Jesus did not mean by glorified what they understood. They meant that the subjected kingdoms of the earth would grovel before the conqueror’s feet; by glorified he meant crucified.” * Mark wrote, said scholar N. T. Wright, that “not the high priest, not a leading rabbi, not even a loyal disciple, but a battle-hardened thug in Roman uniform, used to killing humans the way one might kill flies, stands before this dying young Jew and says something which, in Mark’s mind, sends a signal to the whole world that the kingdom has indeed come.” ** Of John’s report of Jesus’ final words, Pastor Hamilton wrote, “I learned that in Greek the phrase is expressed in just one word: *tetelestai*. That word is a shout of victory announcing that a battle has been won, a mission accomplished.... God’s saving mission was finished.” ***

- Moses asked, “Please show me your glorious presence” (Exodus 33:18), and God “passed in front of him and proclaimed: ‘The LORD! The LORD! A God who is compassionate and merciful, very patient, full of great loyalty and faithfulness’” (Exodus 34:6). In our world, “glory” usually means power or wealth. In what ways is God’s mercy, love, patience, and loyalty a greater kind of “glory”? The apostle Paul said Christ’s followers “even take pride in our problems” (Romans 5:3). Does your view of “glory” for your life lie mainly in strength and accomplishments that others admire? What has to happen inwardly for you to let God’s power transform your struggles or pain into “glory”? How can you learn, at times of struggle, to say like Jesus in John 12:28, “Father, glorify your name!”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you said that you would draw all people to you when you were lifted (on the cross). You have drawn me. Now use me to shine YOUR glory to all in my world. Amen.

* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of John—Volume 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, revised edition 1976, p. 123.)

** Wright, N. T., *Mark for Everyone* (New Testament for Everyone) (p. 215). SPCK. Kindle Edition.

*** Hamilton, Adam. *John* (p. 136). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.