

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JANUARY 3

MARK 6:35-52

THE BACKGROUND

On the way to a synagogue ruler's home to heal his seriously ill daughter, Jesus healed a woman who had hemorrhaged for 12 years. She had spent all her money seeking a cure, but doctors had been unable to stop the flow of blood. When she touched one of the tassels on a corner of Jesus' robe, however, her hemorrhaging stopped (see Mark 5:25-29). Jesus affirmed and encouraged her, assuring her that her faith had made her whole (see 5:34).

Messengers brought the devastating news that the synagogue ruler's daughter had died. Jesus, however, encouraged the ruler, urged him to have faith, and continued the walk to the ruler's house. There, He cleared out mourners who laughed at Him for saying the girl was merely sleeping. Then compassionately and tenderly, Jesus raised her to life (see 5:36-43).

Jesus then went to Nazareth, His hometown. When He taught in the synagogue, the people were indignant because of His wisdom and questioned how He performed miracles. Likely with sarcasm, they cited Jesus' being a carpenter and acknowledged their familiarity with Him and His family members. Their questions implied an unspoken one: "Who does He think He is?" (see 6:1-3). Probably with a note of sadness, Jesus acknowledged their rejection (see 6:4). Because of their lack of faith in Him, He was not able to perform major miracles there but could only heal "a few sick people" (6:5). He chose to limit His work in accordance with human response. The people's unbelief "amazed" Him (6:6a).

1. IN OVERWHELMING NEED (MARK 6:35-37)

Jesus and His disciples entered a boat and went "to a remote place" (6:32). This occasion was the first of a number of withdrawals from Galilee and subsequent returns. Many people noticed their departure, recognized them, and hurried overland around the lake's northern shore to the eastern side and arrived at the boat's landing place ahead of its occupants (see 6:33). The isolated area was somewhere on the lake's northeastern shore. Luke placed it near Bethsaida [beth SAY ih duh] (see Luke 9:10). When Jesus disembarked, He saw "a huge crowd" and was deeply moved because the

people were similar to a flock of unattended, helpless sheep (Mark 6:34). Instead of being upset because the crowd deprived Him and His men of needed relaxation and restoration, Jesus was deeply affected by their condition. He saw them as a flock that had no shepherd to care for them, so "He began to teach them" (6:34).

Verses 35-36: *When it was already late, His disciples approached Him and said, "This place is a wilderness, and it is already late! Send them away, so they can go into the surrounding countryside and villages to buy themselves something to eat."*

Late in the day, anxious disciples reminded Jesus' that the hour was *late* (6:35); literally, they pointed out that much daytime had passed. The time was somewhere between 3:00 p.m. and sunset. They described the area as a wilderness. Daylight would soon be gone, and sources of food were not readily available. Thus, the disciples urged Jesus to send the people into the surrounding countryside and villages to buy themselves something to eat (6:36). The word *countryside* (literally, "fields") referred to scattered farms. The term *villages* designated nearby settlements. Perhaps the people could purchase enough food to alleviate hunger until they could return home.

Verse 37: *"You give them something to eat," He responded. They said to Him, "Should we go and buy 200 denarii worth of bread and give them something to eat?"*

Jesus directed the disciples to feed the crowd. The Twelve did not have enough food to satisfy the crowd's hunger. Their startled, incredulous reply in the form of a question strongly protested that Jesus' suggestion was impossible or absurd. A denarius was the daily pay for a common laborer. Thus, 200 denarii would be roughly the equivalent of eight months' to a year's income for an agricultural worker. The disciples did not have that kind of money. The Greek word for *bread* could literally mean "loaves" or might have the wider sense of "food." Doubtless, the disciples felt genuine concern for the hungry crowd, but the Twelve failed to recognize their responsibility to help or the resources available to them.

2. IN OBEYING GOD (MARK 6:38-44)

Verse 38: *And He asked them, "How many loaves do you have? Go look." When they found out they said, "Five, and two fish."*

Jesus asked the disciples how many loaves were available or how much food was on hand. He commanded them to go among the crowd and assess the resources. The phrase *when they found out* reflects the effort of search. John recorded that Andrew found a boy in the crowd who had "five barley loaves and two fish" (John 6:8-9). The five loaves probably were small, round, flat cakes. The two fish were salted or roasted (perhaps dried) and were about the size of sardines. The boy's small meal reflected the fare of poor people.

Verse 39: *Then He instructed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass.*

Jesus instructed the disciples to have all the people sit down in groups. The people may have been arranged in the normal configuration of guests at tables: people in rows on three sides with an open end to allow serving of food. That they sat on the green grass indicates a time in the spring near the celebration of Passover. Only Mark among the Gospel writers mentioned the grass was *green* on this occasion.

Verse 40: *So they sat down in ranks of hundreds and fifties.*

The disciples acted according to Jesus' instructions, thereby expressing faith in His power to meet the crowd's needs. The people sat down in ranks of hundreds and fifties. The Greek term rendered *sat down* literally means "to fall backwards" or "to recline at table" with the sense of halfway reclining. The Greek term rendered *ranks* literally is "garden beds" and conveys the image of orderly rows or squares. One suggestion is that the people's colorful clothing caused the groups to resemble garden beds.

Verses 41-42: *Then He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke the loaves. He kept giving them to His disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. Everyone ate and was filled.*

Jesus took the five loaves of barley bread and the two fish, looked upward, and blessed and broke the loaves (Mark 6:41). The phrase *looking up to heaven* expressed the act of prayer—in this case, an expression of thanks. The term *blessed* conveyed the idea of invoking a blessing on God. The ancient expression of gratitude for bread invoked a blessing on God, who provided bread from the earth.

Jesus broke the loaves into pieces and continued to give portions of bread to the disciples to serve the people. The Twelve not only participated in the miracle but also were re-

mindful of their servant roles. Then Jesus divided the two fish; through the disciples He distributed pieces of fish to all the people. He continued the process until everyone ate and was filled (6:42).

Verses 43-44: *Then they picked up 12 baskets full of pieces of bread and fish. Now those who ate the loaves were 5,000 men.*

When the people finished eating, the disciples picked up 12 baskets full of pieces of bread and fish (6:43). The baskets were wicker containers, and the pieces were edible fragments, not scraps to be thrown away. The implication could be that nothing was wasted and each disciple had a basket of food. More likely, however, the 12 baskets represented the new people of God that Jesus was creating and His power to provide more than enough for His people. If He could miraculously feed 5,000 men (6:44) plus women and children (see Matt. 14:21), certainly He could take care of believers.

Jesus' feeding the crowd of more than 5,000 people is the only miracle preserved in all four Gospels. This fact indicates the importance and the meaning the miracle had for early Christians. It demonstrated Jesus' compassion and power. When the Messiah came, Jews expected Him to provide manna as Moses did in the wilderness. Jesus' act may have been an indication that the prophet Moses promised had arrived (see Deut. 18:15,18). In addition, Mark may have viewed it as foreshadowing the Lord's Supper and the church's continuing celebration of it. Possibly, the miracle also carried overtones of the messianic banquet at the end of the age. Jesus' disciples may not have understood the reason He told them to have the people arranged in groups, but in faith they obeyed Him.

3. IN OBVIOUS DISTRESS (MARK 6:45-52)

Verse 45: *Immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while He dismissed the crowd.*

When the fragments of the meal were gathered in 12 baskets, Jesus made (compelled) the disciples get into the boat in which they had come to the remote place. The words *immediately* and *made* convey a sense of haste and urgency. That Jesus had to make them leave likely indicates they were reluctant to go. Mark did not give the reason for Jesus' actions, but John the Gospel writer did so. The people

responded to the miraculous feeding by hailing Him as "the Prophet who was to come into the world" and were ready "to come and take Him by force to make Him king" (John 6:14-15). The people fused the promised prophet in Moses' mold with the military/political messianic figure of a king like David. Jesus rejected that misguided, erroneous concept. Either because the disciples were inciting the people or were in danger of getting caught up in the excitement, Jesus wanted to get them away quickly.

Jesus commanded the disciples to go ahead of Him by boat to the other side, to Bethsaida. One view is that the word *Bethsaida* refers to a site on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Equally as likely, however, Bethsaida-Julias on the northeastern shore was the destination, a short trip by boat from the remote, desert place. After Jesus ushered the disciples into the boat, He dispersed the crowd. He wanted to suppress or extinguish any movement to make Him king.

Verse 46: *After He said good-bye to them, He went away to the mountain to pray.*

Jesus removed Himself from the people and went away to the mountain to pray. In the face of the people's—and perhaps the disciples'—misunderstanding, Jesus felt the need to retire to a place of solitude to commune with His Heavenly Father.

Verse 47: *When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the sea, and He was alone on the land.*

The feeding of the multitude occurred late in the day (see Mark 6:35). Thus, the time of Jesus' being on the land and the disciples' rowing the boat in the middle of the sea was when evening came. This time period was between sunset and dark, or after 6:00 p.m. Jesus was alone on the land. Commentators have offered differing views of what the phrase *the land* indicates. One view is that after His time of prayer, Jesus stood on the shore as the day's light continued to fade. A second suggestion is that Jesus remained on "the mountain" (6:46), from which vantage point He could see the disciples in the boat on the lake. The phrase *in the middle* of the sea may indicate the boat had been blown to the south.

Verse 48: *He saw them being battered as they rowed, because the wind was against them. Around three in the morning He came toward them walking on the sea and wanted to pass by them.*

Jesus saw the disciples being battered as they rowed.

The Greek word translated *being battered* also can mean "being tortured" or "being tormented" and may convey extreme distress. It also can convey the idea of exerting themselves by straining at the oars in an effort to make headway. The disciples strained at the oars as they *rowed* (literally, "drove") against the wind. Around three in the morning Jesus approached the boat, walking on the sea. Again He demonstrated He was Lord over nature (see 4:39).

The phrase *wanted to pass by them* presents a difficult challenge in biblical interpretation. Why would Jesus walk on turbulent waters and ignore the disciples' distress? He never performed miracles for show or for no purpose. From everything else we know about Him, He would not refuse to help His harassed disciples. Thus, whatever the thrust of the phrase is, to me it cannot mean Jesus had any intention of leaving His men in peril. Among suggested interpretations are: (1) Jesus wanted the disciples to express to Him their need. (2) The phrase presents the disciples' impression at the time. (3) The phrase can be taken in the sense of "pass in view of"; Jesus walked near enough for the disciples to see Him. (4) The Greek words should be translated, "He intended to pass their way." Suggestions (3) and (4) seem to be the stronger and more plausible views.

Verses 49-50a: *When they saw Him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw Him and were terrified.*

When the hard-pressed disciples spotted Jesus walking on the sea (6:49), they shrieked in alarm. They thought it was a ghost. The Greek word translated *ghost* lies behind our English word *phantom*. All the disciples saw what they thought was an apparition and were terrified (6:50a).

Verse 50b: *Immediately He spoke with them and said, "Have courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."*

Jesus immediately sought to calm and assure the frightened disciples. He exhorted them to have courage or "take heart." Jesus identified Himself with the words, "It is I." Because of His presence, they had reason to regain hope and confidence. Literally, Jesus said: "I myself, I am." His words likely reflected God's response to Moses' question concerning His name in Exodus 3:14: "This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you." Thus Jesus' self-identification expressed His Deity. Because of His powerful presence, the disciples had no reason to fear any longer.

Verse 51: *Then He got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. They were completely astounded,*

Jesus boarded the boat and the wind ceased. In Mark 4:35-41, He calmed a storm on the lake by commanding the wind and the sea to cease. In 6:51, His joining the disciples in the boat calmed the storm. Understandably, they were completely astounded. Mark's language stressed the disciples' inner wonder at what had taken place.

Verse 52: *because they had not understood about the loaves. Instead, their hearts were hardened.*

The reason for the disciples' amazement at what had transpired was their failure to understand about the loaves. They were close to the action as Jesus broke the loaves and divided the fish, and they participated by serving the food to the people. They were well aware of the miracle involved. Evidently, however, they failed to see in the event the revelation of Jesus' identity. The feeding of the multitude should have enabled the disciples to understand the calming of the storm as a further revelation of Jesus' identity, but they failed to grasp the meaning.

The disciples lacked spiritual perception. The statement that *their hearts were hardened* indicates a slowness to learn, not the kind of willful rejection demonstrated by some such as the Pharisees. The word *heart* was used of the essential person—the center of life that included intellect, will, and emotions.

Mark included more than one account of Jesus' calming storms that terrified and threatened the disciples (see 4:35-41). These accounts had special meaning for early Christians. As in the case of the disciples who followed Jesus' directive and set out to cross the lake, early Christians were striving to obey Him and in the course of doing so were encountering the stiff headwinds of opposition. Did Jesus care? Mark's account assured these believers Jesus was aware of their plight (see 6:48), was present with them, had power over the forces that opposed them (see 6:51), and would accompany believers to safety (see 6:53). For some, that safety might be entering His immediate presence following martyrdom.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JANUARY 10

MARK 8:11-13,16-21,27-33

THE BACKGROUND

On the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus had multiplied five loaves and two fish to feed a multitude of more than 5,000 people (see Mark 6:30-44). Then He sent the disciples by boat ahead of Him to Bethsaida [beth SAY ih duh], likely also on the northeastern shore a short distance from the miraculous feeding's site (see Luke 9:10). A storm arose, and the disciples were having extreme difficulty rowing their boat. Jesus came to them, walking on the water. He entered the boat, and the wind ceased. The disciples were amazed. In spite of the miracle of providing food for a multitude, they still did not understand Jesus' identity. They lacked spiritual perception (see 6:45-52).

Apparently the storm's strong wind blew the boat off-course. Jesus and the disciples "came to land at Gennesaret" [gih NESS uh ret] (6:53), an area on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. People recognized Jesus and brought their sick people to Him so He would heal them (see 6:54-55). No matter where He went, people "laid the sick in the marketplaces." Those who touched "the tassel of His robe" (6:56) were healed.

1. LITTLE HOPE (MARK 8:11-13)

Verse 11: *The Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, demanding of Him a sign from heaven to test Him.*

Still intent on discrediting Jesus, the Pharisees confronted Him and began to argue with Him. The form of the Greek term translated *argue* conveys the sense that the Pharisees started immediately to dispute with Jesus and continued. They challenged Him to perform a sign from heaven that would demonstrate God's approval of Him. The Pharisees demanded evidence to show that Jesus acted with God's authority. They wanted to test Him. The Greek word translated *test* also can mean "tempt" (see Mark 1:13, where the same Greek word appears). Mark may have meant that behind the Pharisees' demand for a sign was Satan's temptation for Jesus to work wonders for show.

Verse 12: *But sighing deeply in His spirit, He said, "Why does this generation demand a sign? I assure you: No sign will be given to this generation!"*

In response to the Pharisees' demand, Jesus sighed deeply in His spirit. The Greek term rendered *sighing* conveys intense emotion and can have the sense of groaning. The inner reaction at the core of His being expressed Jesus' indignation and grief. Then Jesus asked the reason the present generation repeatedly sought a sign. The phrase *this generation* referred to people like the Pharisees who rejected God's revelation in Jesus.

Jesus emphatically refused to perform a miracle on demand; under no circumstances would He work wonders merely to demonstrate He could do so. The phrase "*I assure you*" is the form of an oath. He would perform no sign for people who opposed God's revelation in Him. Throughout His entire ministry, Jesus steadfastly refused to adopt the role of wonder-worker.

Verse 13: *Then He left them, got on board the boat again, and went to the other side.*

Jesus turned away from the unbelieving Pharisees, re-entered the boat, and traveled to the other side of the lake. Likely, the group was moving toward Bethsaida Julius on the lake's northeastern shore (see 8:22).

The Pharisees rejected the truth about Jesus' identity and His message of grace. They were not open to spiritual truth, certainly not to the truth about Jesus, and thus not even a miracle would have helped them.

The disciples had neglected to bring enough bread to eat as they traveled. They "had only one loaf with them in the boat" (8:14). Jesus noted their discovery and resulting chagrin and warned them against "the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod" (8:15). Likely, in this context Jesus used "yeast" in the sense of pervasive evil. "The yeast of the Pharisees" may well have referred to their spiritual blindness as evidenced by their insistence on legalism and their demand for a sign. "The yeast of Herod" may have indicated Antipas's worldliness. In both cases, the result was unbelief.

2. SOME HOPE (MARK 8:16-21)

Verse 16: *They were discussing among themselves that they did not have any bread.*

The disciples failed to understand what Jesus meant. Likely, they began assessing blame for the oversight that resulted in only one loaf of bread on board. On the other hand, perhaps taking His words literally, they wondered why Jesus

would talk about yeast when they had so little bread. Either way, the disciples did not grasp Jesus' analogy.

Verse 17: *Aware of this, He said to them, "Why are you discussing that you do not have any bread? Do you not yet understand or comprehend? Is your heart hardened?"*

Overhearing the disciples' discussion about having an insufficient amount of bread, Jesus began a series of rapid-fire questions. He first asked the reason they could not move beyond their fixation on literal bread to grasp His spiritual teaching. The disciples needed to sharpen their intellects and to develop spiritual sensitivity. They needed to understand and to perceive clearly who Jesus is and what He was doing. He asked whether their hearts were hardened—whether they still were mentally and spiritually dull. Jesus did not accuse the disciples of willful rejection of truth but of slowness to comprehend (see 6:52).

Verses 18-19: *Do you have eyes, and not see, and do you have ears, and not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the 5,000, how many baskets full of pieces of bread did you collect?" "Twelve," they told Him.*

Jesus' question about the disciples' failure to see and hear reflected Jeremiah's use of the same analogy to rebuke the people of Judah for their lack of spiritual perception. Jeremiah called them "foolish and senseless"—without heart or spiritual understanding (Jer. 5:21). Again, Jesus had in mind the disciples' mental and spiritual dullness. They were painfully slow to grasp the deeper meaning of Jesus' identity, words, and actions.

By means of a quiz, Jesus refreshed the disciples' memories concerning two recent miraculous events. First, He had them recall the miracle of feeding the 5,000 (see Mark 6:30-44). After the people ate, how many baskets full of leftover, edible pieces of bread did the disciples collect? They answered correctly: "Twelve." The number should have meant more than each disciple's having food.

Verse 20: *"When I broke the seven loaves for the 4,000, how many large baskets full of pieces of bread did you collect?" "Seven," they said.*

Then Jesus referred to His miracle of feeding the 4,000 and asked how many large baskets full of pieces of bread the disciples had collected. They again answered correctly: "Seven." As in the previous miraculous feeding, the number meant something. Jesus was trying to get the disciples to understand that the numbers of baskets in both instanc-

es were not random but deliberate.

Verse 21: *And He said to them, “Don’t you understand yet?”*

Jesus attempted to stimulate the disciples’ thinking by asking, “Don’t you understand yet?” John’s Gospel makes clear the meaning of Jesus’ miracle of feeding the 5,000: Jesus is “the bread of life” (John 6:35). The miracle of feeding the 4,000 conveyed the same message.

Also, the numbers of baskets were symbolic. The 12 baskets represented Israel’s twelve tribes, and the miracle had been performed in Jewish territory. Thus, Jesus had come to His own people with the good news of God’s grace; He could provide for their spiritual needs. The 12 baskets also pointed to the new people of God composed of Jesus’ followers. The seven baskets represented perfection or completion. The miracle performed in Gentile territory signified God’s good news in Jesus was for Gentiles also. In addition, the large amounts of edible bread left over demonstrated Jesus’ more-than-adequate power as well as His overflowing grace and compassion for all people. His followers were to have unwavering faith in His presence, power, and provision.

Although the disciples were agonizingly slow to catch on at times, they basically were open to spiritual truth. Thus, Jesus continued to work with them. The word *yet* (Mark 8:21) shows He had hope for them. The disciples’ conversation about food revealed how little they, despite having heard His teachings and having seen His miracles, understood about Jesus.

3. MORE HOPE (MARK 8:27-33)

Jesus and His disciples arrived at Bethsaida. People brought a blind man to Him and asked Him to touch him so he would be healed. Jesus led the blind man outside the village. Following a common procedure of the time, Jesus placed spittle on the man’s eyes and touched them. Jesus asked whether he saw anything (see 8:22-23). The man said he could see people moving, but they were indistinct (8:24). Jesus touched the man’s eyes again, and he saw “everything clearly” (8:25). In keeping with Jesus’ desire not to be viewed merely as a wonder-worker or to be proclaimed Messiah prematurely, He instructed the man to go directly to his home, not into the village (see 8:26). This healing is the only miracle of Jesus preserved in the Gospels in which He healed

someone in stages. Coming immediately after the disciples’ slowness to understand Jesus’ identity, the man’s gaining sight in stages likely mirrored the gradual development of the disciples’ spiritual insight. The disciples’ experience recorded in 8:27-33 represented advancement in their development. Openness to spiritual truth often develops slowly, gradually leading in stages to spiritual understanding.

Verse 27a: *Jesus went out with His disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi.*

Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi [SESS uh REE uh FIL ih pigh]. *The villages* were the small towns in the district of Caesarea Philippi, the major city. Caesarea Philippi was located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee on the slopes of Mount Hermon. This area was in the predominantly Gentile territory that Herod Philip ruled. Caesarea Philippi had been the center of Baal worship and later of the worship of the Greek god Pan. Herod the Great had built a temple there for the worship of Emperor Caesar Augustus. Jesus purposely chose this context in which to ask His disciples a crucial question concerning their perception of His identity.

Verses 27b-28: *And on the road He asked His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They answered Him, “John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, one of the prophets.”*

Jesus first asked the disciples what people were saying about Him. Who did people in general think He was? The disciples told Him what they were hearing. Some people thought He was John the Baptist resurrected (8:28). So one view was that Jesus was John resurrected. Others identified Jesus as Elijah, Israel’s great prophet Jews believed would come in advance of the Messiah (see 6:15). Still others considered Jesus to be in Israel’s prophetic line—one more in a succession of prophets (see Mark 6:15). None of the disciples reported hearing anybody identify Jesus as the Promised Messiah.

Verses 29-30: *“But you,” He asked them again, “who do you say that I am?” Peter answered Him, “You are the Messiah!” And He strictly warned them to tell no one about Him.*

Then Jesus asked the crucial question on which a great deal hinged. Of highest importance was the perception of Jesus’ closest followers. They had been with Him, had heard His teachings, and had seen His miracles. Had they even begun to realize His identity and what He was about? If they were to continue His ministry following His crucifixion, res-

urrection, and ascension, they would need to be fully convinced He was the Messiah, God’s Son. Nothing less would enable them to be faithful to Him and effective in His continuing work.

Peter spoke for all the disciples: “You are the Messiah!” The disciples viewed Jesus as God’s Anointed Deliverer. As Peter revealed later, their perception was somewhat blurred or out of focus; but they were on the way to the necessary perception. The time for Jesus to make His messiahship widely known—a time of His choosing—had not arrived. Thus, He strongly charged the disciples not to broadcast their perception of Him.

Verse 31: *Then He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be killed, and rise after three days.*

Following Peter’s confession, Jesus began preparing the disciples for what lay ahead. He revealed what the future held for Him. He used His favorite reference for Himself: *the Son of Man*. This self-designation stressed His humanity and His Deity in a way that avoided the military/political baggage many Jews attached to the expected Messiah. As the prophesied Suffering Servant of Isaiah (see Isa. 52:13–53:12), Jesus would offer Himself willingly and vicariously to provide forgiveness for people’s sins. The Greek word translated *must* has the force of moral or Divine necessity. The elders, the chief priests, and the scribes would reject Jesus. Taken together, these religious leaders formed the Sanhedrin, the Jews’ highest court. The Sanhedrin’s rejection would result in Jesus’ death, but He would rise after three days.

Verse 32: *He was openly talking about this. So Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.*

Jesus continued to talk openly and frankly about what He soon would experience. His words about suffering and dying were too much for Peter, who took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him. The Greek term for *took* presents the image of facing someone. As we might say, Peter got in Jesus’ face. He intended to set Jesus straight. What caused Peter to reprimand Jesus? Peter and the disciples shared the strong belief that the Messiah would be a conquering king in David’s mold; their concept had no room for a suffering and dying Messiah. Peter had expressed their conviction that Jesus was the Promised Messiah. For Jesus to begin to talk about being rejected, suffering, and dying alarmed Peter.

Verse 33: *But turning around and looking at His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind Me, Satan, because you’re not thinking about God’s concerns, but man’s!”*

Jesus turned from facing Peter to look at the other disciples. Doubtless, they shared Peter’s view and approved of his attempt to correct Jesus. Jesus countered Peter’s reprimand with a strong reproof of His own. The rebuke, “*Get behind Me, Satan,*” may well mean that at the moment, Satan was using Peter to issue the same kind of temptation Jesus had faced after His baptism: to avoid voluntary, vicarious suffering and death on people’s behalf—to take a shortcut that did not involve the cross to reach His goals. Peter’s refusal to take seriously Jesus’ words about suffering and dying meant he did not have God’s purposes in mind. Peter thought in human terms, not in God’s terms. The disciples showed they had some understanding that Jesus was the Messiah, but they were not ready to accept the further truth that He would die and be resurrected.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JANUARY 17

MARK 3:3-5; 5:33-42; 10:14-16

THE BACKGROUND

During His public ministry, Jesus moved about the Holy Land and at times went outside Jewish territory. He was an itinerant Teacher with a close group of twelve disciples and a larger group of followers. In addition to teaching, Jesus' ministry also focused on preaching and healing. He demonstrated consistent concern for people's spiritual well-being; He announced the good news of God's grace revealed in Him and called for repentance and faith. He extended friendship and acceptance to His society's outcasts. Jesus elevated women's status by treating them as persons of worth, not as items of property. He showed compassion for people by restoring them to physical soundness. He fed large groups of hungry people who had remained with Him during extensive periods of teaching. In everything Jesus did, He showed concern for people; He always acted on the side of life. Mark's Gospel presents various occasions on which Jesus demonstrated the high value He places on human life.

1. CHECK YOUR INTENTIONS (MARK 3:3-5)

Shortly after Jesus launched His public ministry, Jewish religious leaders began to question His authority and to oppose Him. They responded indignantly to His claiming authority to forgive sins. They criticized Him for sharing table fellowship with their society's unacceptable people and for condoning—if not encouraging—His disciples to ignore the minute regulations the leaders had added to the law (see 2:1-28). In 3:1, Jesus entered the synagogue—probably the synagogue in Capernaum where previously He had exorcised an unclean spirit from a man (see 1:21-28). In the synagogue was “a man . . . who had a paralyzed hand” (3:1). Pharisees in attendance were eying Jesus relentlessly in an attempt to find a basis for accusing and discrediting Him. The idea conveyed is that they kept dogging His every move. Interestingly, the Pharisees evidently had not come to the synagogue to worship; and rather than express concern for the physically impaired man, they wanted “to see whether [Jesus] would heal him on the Sabbath” (3:2). To them, preservation of their revered Sabbath rules took precedence over a person.

Verse 3: *He told the man with the paralyzed hand, “Stand*

before us.”

Jesus noticed the man with the paralyzed hand. Luke the physician recorded that the man's “right hand” was paralyzed (Luke 6:6)—a compounded tragedy because most people were right-handed. The form of the Greek term rendered *paralyzed* conveyed the sense of withering caused by an injury or a disease, not a condition with which the man was born. A later book not included in the New Testament stated the man was a stonemason whose condition kept him from working, and he did not want to beg.

Jesus addressed the unfortunate man. The command, “*Stand before us,*” literally is “Rise into the midst.” Jesus urged the man to get up from a sitting position and to stand in the middle of the room so everyone could see him. I strongly feel Jesus' command was an invitation and a challenge for everybody there—and especially the Pharisees—to really see the stricken man as a person of worth who deserved concern and help.

Verse 4: *Then He said to them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent.*

Jesus addressed the Pharisees. The word *them*, taken with phrase “they were watching Him closely” in verse 2 and the words *they were silent* later in verse 4, obviously referred to Jesus' opponents. Probably, He looked squarely into the eyes of the people who were secretly watching Him out of the corners of their eyes to catch Him in flagrant violation of their Sabbath regulations.

Jesus asked the guardians and keepers of the law a question about what was lawful on the Sabbath. Religious interpreters had defined in minute detail what people could and could not do on the Sabbath. One such rule had to do with caring for sick or injured people. If their lives were in danger, people could receive whatever help was necessary to keep them alive. If their lives were not at risk, sick people could be kept stable but could not be made better. To extend care that caused them to improve was considered work on the Sabbath. Such help was to be confined to the other six days.

Jesus' question put the Pharisees in a bind. None of them would say that to do evil or to kill was *lawful on the Sabbath* or on any other day. Thus the opposite must be true: A person lawfully could do good or save life on the Sabbath. In fact, to *do good* for someone or to *save life* on any day—including the Sabbath—was right and not to do so would be evil or the equivalent of killing the person. The Pharisees

refused to answer. If they agreed people could do good and save lives on the Sabbath, they would have to abandon their rules. If they held people could not do good and save lives on the Sabbath, they actually were condoning doing nothing, which constituted evil because it reflected an attitude of indifference toward human need. The Pharisees would insist that because the man with the paralyzed hand was not in danger of dying, his healing could wait until the next day. Jesus demonstrated that compassionate power acts promptly when presented with human need.

Verse 5: *After looking around at them with anger and sorrow at the hardness of their hearts, He told the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.*

Jesus' gaze swept over the Pharisees with anger and sorrow. The Greek word translated *anger* conveys the sense of a settled opposition to sin, a disposition rather than a sudden burst of emotional anger. Paul used the same word to depict God's steadfast stance against sin (see Rom. 1:18-32). Another Greek term has the idea of a sudden burst of anger that flares suddenly and soon subsides. Jesus' wrath was directed toward the evil of a legalism that placed a human tradition above a human being. His anger was not sinful, unlike most of our anger, because He controlled His anger and pointed it at evil, not at people. Observe that His wrath was accompanied by grief. The compound form of the Greek word rendered *sorrow* conveys that Jesus' grief was deep and intense.

What stirred Jesus' forceful opposition and profound sorrow was the hardness of [the Pharisees'] hearts. The Greek term rendered *hardness* comes from a word for a kind of marble. It was used of a callus that formed on the ends of fractured bones. Thus, it came to mean callousness or hardness in general. The Pharisees' lack of sensitivity and compassion drew Jesus' strong response. They were treating the man as an object, a mere test-case for Jesus instead of a person of worth to whom they should have extended compassion and care.

Jesus turned His full attention to the man with the paralyzed hand. Evidently the man's arm was functional, so when Jesus told him to stretch out his hand, he was able to do so. As he held his hand out to Jesus, it was immediately restored to its former soundness. Jesus demonstrated doing a good work on the Sabbath. Incredibly, the miracle of healing was met with silence from His opponents.

Instead of celebrating a man's miraculous restoration to wholeness, the Pharisees stalked out of the synagogue. Luke stated they "were filled with rage" (Luke 6:11). Stung and probably deeply embarrassed by their failure to best Jesus in logic, to deny His power and authority, or to discredit Him, they resorted to their only remaining option. They had to get rid of Him. They left the synagogue and entered an alliance with the Herodians, with whom they were diametrically opposed politically. The Pharisees chafed under Roman occupation and longed for freedom and Jewish rule. In contrast the Herodians supported Roman rule. In spite of their contrasting loyalties, the two parties began plotting to kill Jesus—literally, to "destroy" (Mark 3:6) Him, as a person would slaughter an animal. To preserve their humanly-devised tradition concerning the Sabbath, the Pharisees were willing to reject God's Word and break the Sixth Commandment. Ironically, people who held that healing on the Sabbath was wrong had no qualms about plotting a murder on that day.

2. CARE ABOUT QUALITY (MARK 5:33-34)

In the vast throng accompanying Jesus was a woman with a serious illness. She had hemorrhaged for 12 years, and all attempts to stem the flow of blood had failed. Numerous doctors had treated her but to no avail. That she "had endured much under many doctors" (5:26) does not mean they mistreated her but that they had done all they could. In the process, she had used up all her resources. Rather than improving, she steadily had declined in health (5:25-26). She was desperate, as Jairus was. Also as in Jairus's case, the woman had faith in Jesus' ability to heal. She had heard about Him and she was convinced that if she could merely touch one of the tassels on the hem of His robe, her flow of blood would stop. So the woman made her way through the crowd, drew close to Jesus, and because of her uncleanness furtively touched His robe. Immediately, her hemorrhaging stopped; she felt the healing take place and knew she had been cured (5:27-29). The Greek verb form translated "was cured" (5:29) indicates the restoration to soundness would last.

Jesus perceived that Divine energy "had gone out from Him" (5:30). Such personal expenditure of power hints that Jesus healed people at cost to Himself. He asked, "Who touched My robes?" Some interpreters have viewed the question as an indication of Jesus' humanity; others

have suggested He wanted to draw a fuller confession of faith from the woman. At any rate, His question drew an incredulous, dismayed, and perhaps somewhat sarcastic response from the disciples. A huge throng was pushing and shoving around Jesus. Who could possibly identify a specific individual who brushed against Him? Jesus, however, continued to scan the crowd around Him to spot the individual (5:31-32).

Verse 33: *Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came with fear and trembling, fell down before Him, and told Him the whole truth.*

Likely, the woman felt she was about to be identified. Cautiously and timidly, she approached Jesus. Interpreters have suggested a number of reasons for her approaching Jesus with fear and trembling: (1) The woman's knowledge that she had been miraculously healed stirred the strong emotion of fear. (2) She was aware of her low status as a woman in a male-dominated society. (3) When she touched Him, she broke Jewish law. She was ritually unclean, and her touch rendered Jesus ceremonially unclean. How would He respond to having been made so? (4) She was afraid Jesus would be angry that she had delayed Him. She prostrated herself before Jesus and told Him the whole truth. Courageously, she no doubt revealed her medical history and the reason she touched Him even though to do so made Him ceremonially unclean.

Verse 34: *"Daughter," He said to her, "your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be free from your affliction."*

Far from expressing anger, Jesus responded to the woman with infinite kindness. His response spoke volumes about His incredible compassion for all people. He addressed her tenderly as daughter to indicate her inclusion in His spiritual family. He stated that her faith (trust or confidence in Him) had made her well. The Greek word's tense conveys completeness and can mean "has healed" in a physical sense or "has saved" in the spiritual sense. Jesus may well have intended both meanings. He told the woman to go in peace (soundness, well-being) and to be free from her affliction. The malady that literally had plagued her for 12 years was cured and would not return.

3. COMFORT THE SICK (MARK 5:35-42)

Verses 35-36: *While He was still speaking, people came from the synagogue leader's house and said, "Your daughter is*

dead. Why bother the Teacher any more?" But when Jesus overheard what was said, He told the synagogue leader, "Don't be afraid. Only believe."

While Jesus was still speaking, a delegation came from Jairus's house with crushing news: The little girl had died (5:35). Jesus overheard the sad report and immediately encouraged Jairus (5:36). In light of the rest of the account, the Lord's exhortation, "Don't be afraid. Only believe," was not a denial of the girl's death but was Jesus' refusal to accept the death as final.

Verses 37-38: *He did not let anyone accompany Him except Peter, James, and John, James' brother. They came to the leader's house, and He saw a commotion—people weeping and wailing loudly.*

Excluding everyone but Peter, James, and John (5:37)—the inner circle of the Twelve—Jesus continued with Jairus to his house (5:38). There they encountered a commotion or "uproar." Mourners were weeping and wailing loudly. Even poor families of deceased members were supposed to hire two flute players and one woman mourner. Of course, the synagogue ruler's family likely could hire more. Such noisy lamenting was customary among the Jews.

Verse 39: *He went in and said to them, "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but asleep."*

Jesus entered the house and asked the reason for the crying and loud wailing. Then He said, "The child is not dead but asleep." Everything in the account points to Jesus' use of "sleeping" as a softer term for death. In John's Gospel, Jesus responded to a report that His friend Lazarus was sick by telling the disciples he had fallen asleep. The disciples took the words literally, so Jesus stated clearly Lazarus had died (see John 11:1-14). Mark 5:39 reflects the same meaning. In fact, Luke reported that the mourners "knew she was dead" (Luke 8:53). Jesus was not assuring the people that the child merely was in a coma. They could tell the difference between a coma and death. Rather, from His perspective, the child's death was temporary sleep from which He would wake her.

Verse 40: *They started laughing at Him, but He put them all outside. He took the child's father, mother, and those who were with Him, and entered the place where the child was.*

The incredulous mourners started laughing at Jesus. The Greek word conveys the sense of their continuing to deride Him. They were laughing Him to scorn or ridiculing Him. Because of their unbelief, Jesus put them all outside. Then

He took the parents and the three disciples into the child's room.

Verse 41: *Then He took the child by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which is translated, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!")*.

With characteristic gentleness, Jesus took the child by the hand. His touching a corpse made Him ceremonially unclean for the second time in one day, but He cared nothing about ritual in the face of human need. For his Gospel's Greek-speaking recipients, Mark translated Jesus' Aramaic words to her: "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" Jesus' command ensures believers of their future resurrection from death.

Verse 42: *Immediately the girl got up and began to walk. (She was 12 years old.) At this they were utterly astounded.*

Jesus demonstrated He is Lord over death. At His command, the girl got up and began to walk. Only Mark noted she was 12 years old, perhaps a reflection of Peter's memory of the monumental event. The Greek verb tense for *began to walk* conveys continuous action. She continued to walk about. Understandably, everybody in the room was utterly astounded.

Jesus strongly commanded the people who had witnessed the miracle to tell no one about it (Mark 5:43). Again, this was in keeping with His not wanting to be known as a mere wonder-worker and His desire to avoid being identified as the Messiah of popular conception. Jesus directed that the girl be given food—a tender, compassionate touch of His care.

4. PROTECT THE NEXT GENERATION (MARK 10:14-16)

Some Pharisees had approached Jesus with a question about divorce. Jesus' response refuted the Jewish practice of easy divorce and emphasized the sanctity of marriage and the home (see 10:2-12). Then a procession of people—presumably parents—brought children to Him so He might bless them by touching them (see 10:13). Jewish mothers generally wanted their children to receive a distinguished rabbi's blessing. If possible, mothers sought such a blessing on the children's first birthdays. The Greek term rendered "children" could refer to youngsters up to about 12 years of age. As people came with children, the disciples tried to turn them away. Perhaps the disciples wanted to protect Jesus from more intrusion on His time, or they may have seen the adults and children as unimportant.

Verse 14: *When Jesus saw it, He was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me. Don't stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.*

When Jesus saw the disciples' attempts to turn the children away, He was indignant. The Greek word translated *indignant* means "to feel pain" or "to be angry." It is a strong term that conveys deep emotion. The disciples' actions upset Jesus. He ordered them to permit the little children to come to Him.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God belongs to such as these." What did He mean? Jesus was pointing to the child-like characteristics of kingdom citizens. Interpreters have suggested such characteristics as trust, obedience, humility, readiness to forgive, innocence, receptivity, openness, and honesty. In addition, children know themselves to be dependent and lacking in strength. In Jesus' time, children generally were viewed as weak and helpless. Sometimes, they were deemed unimportant, especially in pagan societies. The high regard Jesus displayed for children contrasted vividly with the attitude of many in the Roman world. Some in that era literally threw away unwanted newborn babies.

Jesus stressed that God's kingdom belongs to people of faith whose society may view as insignificant, weak, and helpless people. It does not belong to those who view themselves as self-sufficient with no need for God.

Verse 15: *I assure you: Whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."*

The words "*I assure you*" emphasized the importance of Jesus' following statement. The phrase was His customary introduction to a significant pronouncement (see 3:28; 8:12; 9:1). Jesus declared: "Whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." The Greek word translated *welcome* means "to take with the hand," "to receive," and then "to embrace" and "to make one's own."

Jesus compared a person's entering God's kingdom with a child's receiving a gift. A child's nature is to receive out of an awareness of dependence. My little five-year-old grandson makes the image in verse 15 come alive for me. He delights in receiving presents. He has learned to thank the giver; then he quickly and gleefully tears away the wrapping paper and happily holds the gift. To receive God's kingdom (His beneficent rule) in the manner of a child is to recognize it is a gift of sheer grace and to take it humbly, eagerly, and joyfully.

Jesus issued the stern warning that people who do not receive God's kingdom in the manner of *a little child will never*

enter it. The Greek text has a double negative ("not not") as a strong emphasis that we might render "not at all."

Verse 16: *After taking them in His arms, He laid His hands on them and blessed them.*

Jesus took each child in His arms; in effect, He gave each one a hug. His holding each child demonstrated His tender love and compassion for children. Jesus also laid His hands on each child. Most likely, He placed His hands on each child's head as was customary in asking God's favor for another person. The form of the Greek verb rendered *blessed* conveys continuous action and presents the picture of Jesus unhurriedly placing His hands on each child in succession and invoking God's favor on each one. We do not know how long the line was or the amount of time necessary; we do know Jesus valued all children and was willing to take whatever time was necessary to express love and care to them. He demonstrated His concern for parents (or others who extended care) and their children by insisting they be given access to Him, by using children to teach an important lesson, and by blessing them.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JANUARY 24

MARK 9:33-42,47-50

THE BACKGROUND

Jesus had arrived at a critical point in His ministry. The 12 men He had chosen to accompany Him had heard His teachings, had witnessed His miracles, and had been exposed to His presence with them. How much had they absorbed? How far along were they in their awareness of His identity and His work? In the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi [SESS uh REE uh FIL ih pigh]—an area with a long history of pagan worship—Jesus asked the disciples what people were saying about His identity. They reported the various opinions they had heard (see Mark 8:27-28). Then Jesus asked the critical question: Who did the disciples believe He was? Peter answered, “You are the Messiah” (8:29). After warning the Twelve not to make His identity known, Jesus began to teach them what kind of Messiah He was: the Suffering Servant who would be killed and who would rise from death. In light of Peter’s concept of a conquering military/political Messiah, he tried to correct Jesus. Jesus rebuked him for presenting again the temptation to avoid dying for others and to choose an easier way (see 8:30-33).

1. SHOW OTHERS YOU CARE (MARK 9:33-37)

Jesus and the disciples departed and traveled through Galilee. As they walked, Jesus tried to avoid being noticed. Evidently, He wanted time alone with the disciples to teach them. For the second time, Jesus predicted His approaching death and resurrection (see 9:30-31; see also 8:31). The disciples still did not grasp His meaning, but they did not question Him because “they were afraid” (9:32).

Verse 33: *Then they came to Capernaum. When He was in the house, He asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”*

Jesus and the disciples traveled to Capernaum, where they entered a house, presumably Peter and Andrew’s home (see 1:29). As they had traveled, Jesus had overheard the disciples arguing. The Greek word rendered *arguing* conveys continuous action and also can mean “disputing” or “contending.” Their debate had been long and evidently heated. Jesus asked about the content of their vigorous discussion.

Verse 34: *But they were silent, because on the way they*

had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest.

The disciples were silent, no doubt embarrassed to confess the subject of their argument. Instead of talking about Jesus’ approaching suffering and death, they had debated the pecking order among them—attempting to establish who was the greatest. Pride and ambition had produced rivalry.

Verse 35: *Sitting down, He called the Twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”*

In that time, rabbis usually sat to teach. Sitting down, Jesus addressed the disciples, calling for their attention. Then He stated a kingdom principle that was a reversal of the world’s approach. The world views greatness in terms of self-promotion, power, and prestige. In contrast, Jesus said the believer who wants to rank first in the kingdom must be willing to be last in line—must let others go first—and to minister to others. Christians are to demonstrate care for others by serving them. In God’s view, greatness is measured in terms of active, selfless compassion for others.

Verses 36-37: *Then He took a child, had him stand among them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever welcomes one little child such as this in My name welcomes Me. And whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me, but Him who sent Me.”*

Jesus summoned a child and had him stand in the group’s midst. Then Jesus took the child in His arms (9:36) as He taught the disciples a cardinal kingdom truth. No doubt looking at or motioning toward the child, Jesus said: “Whoever welcomes one little child such as this in My name welcomes Me” (9:37). The Greek term rendered *welcomes* has the idea of receiving or extending hospitality to someone—of being concerned about or extending care to another. Likely, the *child* represented helpless, dependent people whom society considered to be of lesser value. Such people could offer nothing in return; they had no power or influence to enhance the position of the individuals who helped them.

The phrase *in My name* referred to Jesus’ spirit or attitude—His acceptance of all people. Jesus’ followers were to care actively for others as He did, to do so as ministry for Him, and to extend care because they were His people. With the words *welcomes Me*, Jesus stressed His identity with people He came to save (see Matt. 25:34-40). To express care for others was to express care for Him. Also, believers who demonstrated care for others extended hospitality to

God, who sent His Son. When the disciples did not answer His question about their discussion, Jesus taught them the principle of being great by expressing care for others.

2. SEE OTHERS AS COWORKERS (MARK 9:38-41)

Verse 38: *John said to Him, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in Your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn’t following us.”*

The apostle John told Jesus of an action the disciples had taken. John may have wanted to move the conversation away from the disciples’ embarrassing discussion of rank among themselves and Jesus’ ensuing rebuke. Another possibility is that John defensively asserted the disciples’ protectiveness of Jesus’ ministry. John said the disciples had witnessed a man’s driving out demons in Jesus’ name—in His authority. The tense of the Greek word translated *we tried* conveys continuous or repeated action; the disciples kept on trying to stop him, but evidently the man persisted. Their reason for attempting to stop the man’s activity was that he wasn’t following Jesus and the Twelve; he was not a member of their group, and Jesus had not authorized him to use His name.

Verse 39: *“Don’t stop him,” said Jesus, “because there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name who can soon afterwards speak evil of Me.”*

Jesus instructed the disciples to cease their attempts to stop the exorcist. Jesus’ reasoning was that anyone who performed a miracle in His name (with His authority) would not immediately speak evil of the One in whose name he performed his good work.

Verse 40: *For whoever is not against us is for us.*

Jesus declared that people who were not opposed to Him were actual or potential followers. To some degree, they were sympathetic to His cause and were to be considered allies, not competitors. Jesus sought to counteract His disciples’ narrow and exclusive spirit. He expressed the principle that God can and does work through others.

Verse 41: *And whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of My name, since you belong to the Messiah— I assure you: He will never lose his reward.*

Jesus illustrated the principle that God’s working through others encompasses a wide range of expressions. The cup of water given to Jesus’ followers could be literal or figurative. In a land where water often was scarce, giving a thirsty person a drink was a graphic expression of care. On the other

hand, a cup of water could symbolize any gesture of care for Jesus' followers. The phrase *because of My name* may mean "on the ground that," indicating cause or reason. The basis of extending care was the recipients' belonging to the Messiah—their being Jesus' followers.

Even the smallest expression of care for Jesus' followers will receive a reward. Of course, the motive for extending care is not to be rewarded for doing so. The motive is a caring response to need. Such spontaneous compassion issues in what God considers reward, which will be appropriate and more than enough. After rebuking the disciples for their attitude toward someone outside their group working in Jesus' name, Jesus taught them the principle that God can and does work through others.

3. SACRIFICE FOR OTHERS' SAKE (MARK 9:42-43,47-48)

Verse 42: *"But whoever causes the downfall of one of these little ones who believe in Me—it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."*

Jesus contrasted the person who extended care to His follower and the assured reward for doing so to the person who causes the downfall of one of the little ones who believe in Jesus. The Greek word translated *causes the downfall* also means "causes to stumble" or "entices to sin." The phrase *little ones* could refer to literal children or to new and thus weaker or more immature believers. The words *who believe in Me* seem to support the latter interpretation.

Jesus said that death by drowning would be preferable to placing a stumbling block in a little one's way. The *heavy millstone* referred to a large cylindrical stone used in a mill for grinding grain. Such a stone required an animal to turn it. To have such a stone tied around one's neck and then to be thrown into the sea would mean certain death. In fact, this practice was one means of execution in Rome and in the Holy Land. Jesus' point was that to die would be preferable to causing immature believers to sin.

Verse 43: *And if your hand causes your downfall, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell—the unquenchable fire,*

Likely, verses 43-48 elaborate on verse 42. Some interpreters, however, see verse 42 as concluding verses 38-41. Others think verse 42 refers to the danger of causing others to sin and view verses 43-48 as referring to the danger of

causing oneself to sin.

Using dramatic overstatement for emphasis, Jesus told the disciples to remove from their lives anything that would cause more immature believers' downfall and thus the disciples' downfall. The Greek terms rendered *causes your downfall* also mean "causes you to stumble" or "entices you to sin" (see 9:42). Jesus counseled radical surgery to get rid of any spiritually threatening element in life. Using figurative language, He emphasized that whatever endangered a person's spiritual wholeness—whether an attitude, a habit, or a selfish ambition—had to be eliminated from a disciple's life. Jesus stressed that maintaining committed discipleship is worth any sacrifice, because such commitment enables a person to enter life. The word *life* refers to eternal life—life of God's quality begins at the moment of salvation and extends into eternity with God.

Jesus used the illustration of an amputated hand to emphasize that entering eternal life maimed would be infinitely better than being whole and going to hell. The Greek term rendered *hell* is composed of two Hebrew words that mean "valley of Hinnom," a valley located south and west of Jerusalem. The Greek term comes over into English as *Gehenna*. The area became the dumping place for garbage, animal carcasses, and the bodies of executed criminals. Fires designed to consume what was dumped there burned continually. Jewish writings during the period between the Testaments used the word *Gehenna* to refer to the fiery hell of final judgment. In the Gospels, only Jesus used the term for eternal separation from God. The phrase *unquenchable fire* starkly stressed the awfulness of choosing to consign one's life to eternity's burning garbage dump—the fiery place of everlasting punishment for those who have rejected Christ as Savior.

In verse 44 and 46, Jesus quoted Isaiah 66:24 to emphasize the horror of hell. The fires of Gehenna burned constantly to consume the refuse, and worms worked among the decaying debris. In verse 45, Jesus used the image of amputating a foot rather than allowing it to result in being "thrown into hell."

Verses 47-48: *And if your eye causes your downfall, gouge it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.*

With this third image (see 9:43,45), Jesus again emphasized the radical surgery necessary to remove from our lives

anything and everything that causes us and others to sin. To enter the kingdom is worth any sacrifice a person must make to maintain steadfast commitment to Jesus. One interpreter has suggested the "hand" (9:43) symbolized wrong actions believers might be tempted to take, the "foot" (9:45) represented unacceptable places they might be tempted to go, and the "eye" (9:47) suggested greedy desire for possessions. The point is that we are to refrain from leading others astray, even to the point of sacrificing for their sakes something vitally important to us.

4. SEASON OTHERS' LIVES (MARK 9:49-50)

Verse 49: *For everyone will be salted with fire.*

Jesus indicated the disciples would be purified and preserved through persecution, which would come. Salt and fire symbolized purifying elements. *Fire* also could refer to pressures and persecutions that lay ahead. Jesus well may have been calling for self-sacrifice in obedience to Him.

Verse 50: *Salt is good, but if the salt should lose its flavor, how can you make it salty? Have salt among yourselves and be at peace with one another."*

Salt preserves, purifies, and flavors. Its whiteness also symbolizes purity. Thus salt is good, but if it becomes contaminated with impurities, it loses its flavor—its usefulness. Jesus challenged His followers to have salt, by which He meant the spiritual qualities that would make them effective in His service. In addition, they were to be at peace with one another. Rather than competing for greatness, they were to have a servant attitude that fostered healthy relationships and advanced the kingdom. Using salt as a figure of speech, Jesus taught the principle of being a positive influence by calling for His disciples to add to the quality of others' lives.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JANUARY 31

MARK 10:32-45

THE BACKGROUND

Jesus had consistently sought to avoid being viewed as a wonder-worker or the long-awaited political/military Messiah. The time of His choosing had come to confront His people with decisions about Him. Likely, a little more than three years had passed since He had journeyed to the Jordan River to be baptized by John and to begin His public ministry. He had preached God's good news that He embodied: God's kingdom had broken into history in Him. Thus, people were to repent, believe the good news, and order their lives by it. He had chosen twelve disciples to accompany Him. He clearly laid out for them and others the demands of being His disciples.

Jesus had engaged in an extensive ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. He had demonstrated His authority to forgive people's sins, to cast out unclean spirits, to make people physically sound, and to control nature's forces. Jesus had given overwhelming evidence He was the powerful Son of God who exercised His power in compassion for all people—Jews and Gentiles, men and women, and children. He had reached out with grace and love to people His society identified as nobodies and as a result had incurred the religious leaders' opposition. His disregard for the rules and regulations the religious leaders had added to the law incensed them. Thus the religious leaders determined to get rid of Him.

A promising man of wealth had refused Jesus' call to discipleship because he was unwilling to replace his god of material possessions with commitment to Jesus (see Mark 10:17-22). Jesus used the man's regrettable decision to warn against the difficulty wealth posed to entering God's kingdom. The picture Jesus presented dumbfounded the disciples. Jews generally considered wealthy people to be objects of God's favor. In response to Peter's statement that the disciples had left everything to follow Him, Jesus assured them they would receive far more than they had given up. Yet they were not to focus on rewards. God's awards day would hold some surprises (see 10:23-31).

1. FOLLOW THE RIGHT MODEL (MARK 10:32-34)

Verse 32: *They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and*

Jesus was walking ahead of them. They were astonished, but those who followed Him were afraid. Taking the Twelve aside again, He began to tell them the things that would happen to Him.

Jesus and His disciples had been in an area east of the Jordan River (see 10:1). They had begun a journey when the rich man met Jesus with a question about acquiring eternal life (see 10:17). Following that encounter and Jesus' subsequent teaching session, the group again took to the road. The ultimate destination was Jerusalem by way of Jericho (see 10:46). The expression *going up to Jerusalem* literally described the journey to Jerusalem from most directions because of Jerusalem's heightened elevation. Jericho was about 740 feet below sea level, while Jerusalem was about 2,500 feet above sea level. Also because of Jerusalem's religious significance to the Jews, travelers always went *up* to the city. Here, however, the words have the sense of Jesus' moving resolutely toward His suffering, death, and resurrection.

The disciples followed as Jesus walked ahead of them. This procession may have been the group's usual traveling arrangement except for the occasions when Jesus taught the disciples. On the other hand, Jesus' moving ahead may have indicated His eagerness to arrive in Jerusalem. The words *they* and *those who followed* probably refer to two groups. The Twelve continued to be awestruck, and the larger group of followers was in a state of fear. Jesus' determination and unswerving resolution as He led the way to Jerusalem resulted in the astonishment and fear. Luke captured Jesus' demeanor in his statement, "He [Jesus] set fast [firmly, steadfastly] His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51b, author's translation). The time for confrontation had arrived.

The phrase *taking the Twelve aside again* seems to indicate Jesus separated the apostles from the larger group following Him. He began to talk to them about what would happen to Him in Jerusalem. He tried to brace them for the mind-numbing series of events that would occur. To this point, they really had not comprehended His words when He talked about the inevitability of His suffering and death, and the prediction of His resurrection had not registered.

Verse 33: *"Listen! We are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death. Then they will hand Him over to the Gentiles,*

The word *listen* (literally, "behold") called attention to the importance of what followed. Jesus' statement, "We are go-

ing up to Jerusalem," was much more than an indication of the group's destination. It emphasized the culmination of His redemptive mission. His arrival in Jerusalem would create a crisis of decision. In Mark's Gospel, Jerusalem symbolized opposition to Jesus.

For the third time, Jesus predicted His suffering, death, and resurrection (see Mark 8:31; 9:31). The third reference repeats some details recorded in 8:31 and 9:31, but it is more extensive. Jesus' remarks here point ahead to 10:43-45, which makes clear Jesus provides the model we are to follow in order to experience true success.

Jesus again used His favorite self-designation, the Son of Man, to express His humanity and Deity in a way that avoided the Jews' popular concept of a military/political Messiah. Rather than driving out the Romans and ruling from Jerusalem, He would be handed over to the Jews' religious leaders in Jerusalem. The Greek word translated *handed over* also means "delivered up" and has the idea of putting someone into custody to be judged and condemned. The phrase *the chief priests and the scribes* referred to the Sanhedrin [san HEE drihn], the Jews' highest court. Jesus had no doubt that the religious leaders would condemn Him to death. After all, early in Jesus' ministry the Pharisees had begun to plot His death (see 3:6). The religious leaders could not carry out a death penalty, so they would deliver Jesus to the Romans (Gentiles) to be executed.

Verse 34: *and they will mock Him, spit on Him, flog Him, and kill Him, and He will rise after three days."*

Roman soldiers were experts in the gruesome procedure of execution by crucifixion. Generally cruel and callous, the soldiers would wring what pleasure they could out of their task by mocking Jesus as merely another deluded, would-be Messiah. They would ridicule what they regarded as a pathetic pseudo-king. They would insult Him by spitting on Him. Then they would follow their normal execution procedure by flogging Him, inflicting repeated blows on His body, before they crucified Him. Death, however, would not be able to hold Jesus, for after three days in the tomb He would rise.

2. FORGET ABOUT HONORS (MARK 10:35-41)

Verses 35-36: *Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached Him and said, "Teacher, we want You to do something for us if we ask You." "What do you want Me to do for you?" He asked them.*

James and John, along with Peter, made up the apostles' inner circle. The two sons of Zebedee [ZEB uh dee] were the second pair of fishermen Jesus had called to be His disciples (see 1:16-20). Perhaps because Jesus considered the three disciples to be more teachable or to have more potential for leadership, He gave them special opportunities to gain needed insights. Jesus had them accompany Him to Jairus's house to witness His raising Jairus's daughter to life (see 5:37). They also were present at the transfiguration (see 9:2). These opportunities carried greater responsibility to be attentive in order to understand Jesus and His mission.

James and John approached Jesus with a request, perhaps seeking to use their close relationship with Him to get a jump on the others in the disciples' conflict concerning first place among the Twelve (see 9:33-37). Evidently, the brothers wanted Jesus to commit to grant their request before they made it specific. They wanted a binding promise that would ensure they would get what they wanted. Jesus, however, was much too wise and insightful to make a blind, blanket promise. He asked James and John to be specific.

Verse 37: *They answered Him, "Allow us to sit at Your right and at Your left in Your glory."*

Rather than having a heightened awareness of Jesus' purpose because of their special opportunities as members of Jesus' inner circle, James and John revealed they were as slow to understand as the other apostles. Incredibly, immediately following Jesus' third prediction of His suffering, death, and resurrection, James and John were preoccupied with places of honor in Jesus' kingdom. Jesus talked of suffering and death; they were focused on their ambition for power and prestige. In fairness to them, in this respect they were no different from the other apostles.

The phrase *in Your glory* referred to the kingdom James and John assumed Jesus would establish. Their words reflected their clinging to the mistaken expectation of a political/military Messiah who would drive out the Romans and restore Israel to power and prominence (see Acts 1:6). The individual chosen to sit at a king's right was ranked second in the kingdom; the person on the left was next in prominence. James and John believed Jesus was the Messiah, but they misunderstood the nature of His kingdom. They may have expected Jesus to establish that kingdom when He reached Jerusalem. Although some interpreters have suggested the two disciples' request may have been for favored places at the messianic banquet inaugurating the age to

come or for positions of prominence at Jesus' return, they most likely had in mind an earthly kingdom.

Verse 38: *But Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup I drink or to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"*

Focused on personal ambition, James and John had no idea of their request's implications. They did not grasp the truth that Jesus would suffer and die, so how could they conceive of suffering with Him? For Jesus, the way to triumphant rule involved voluntary, sacrificial suffering. Before He received the crown He must endure the cross. Such suffering also was true for His followers.

Jesus' questions to James and John emphasized His coming suffering and death. In the Old Testament, the cup sometimes symbolized God's wrath against sin (see Isa. 51:17-22). It also could indicate a person's lot in life. Sometimes one's cup referred to joy (Ps. 23:5); sometimes to suffering (Jer. 25:15). Jesus used the imagery to refer to His dying in place of and on behalf of people who deserve their sins' just consequences (see Mark 14:36). The word *baptism* in this context carried the sense of an overwhelming flood of trouble or suffering (see Ps. 69:2). The forms of the verbs in the phrases *I drink* and *I am baptized with* indicate Jesus already was in the process of His voluntary suffering on people's behalf. Were James and John able to share His suffering?

Verse 39: *"We are able," they told Him. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink, and you will be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with."*

With self-confidence born of gross misunderstanding, James and John asserted they could drink Jesus' cup. Jesus assured them they would do so, but not in the way they anticipated. Later, in the early years of the Christian movement, Herod Agrippa I would execute James (Acts 12:1-2). According to tradition, John lived to a ripe old age. He suffered torture and exile to the island of Patmos under the emperor Domitian because of his faithfulness to Christ (Rev. 1:9).

Verse 40: *But to sit at My right or left is not Mine to give; instead, it is for those it has been prepared for."*

Jesus declared He did not have the prerogative to grant places of prominence and prestige in His kingdom. The form of the verb in the phrase *for those it has been prepared for* implies someone else already had determined the basis on which honors will be bestowed and would continue to do so. The Father exercises that authority. Furthermore, the phrase indicates that honor or reward will be based on certain well-

defined terms.

Verse 41: *When the other 10 disciples heard this, they began to be indignant with James and John.*

Either the other 10 disciples overheard the exchange between Jesus and Zebedee's sons or the two brothers talked about it in the others' hearing. At any rate, the 10 began to be indignant. The Greek term rendered *indignant* means "to feel pain" or "to grieve" and has the sense of angry resentment. Strongly implied is that their intense resentment flared and remained because they felt the brothers had attempted to forge to the head of the line, which in turn meant the 10 also were concerned with rank and privilege in the kingdom. Peter, James, and John made up the disciples' inner circle, perhaps because they were best equipped among the Twelve for leadership. Peter may have felt James and John had shouldered him aside to become first among leaders, and the other nine disciples may have felt the brothers had tried to take advantage of their close relationship with Jesus.

Jesus' earthly ministry was drawing to a close swiftly. He was on His way to Jerusalem and the cross. At this crucial juncture, the Twelve were embroiled in jostling for favored positions in the kingdom. Their selfish ambition threatened the unity they would need to carry on Jesus' ministry after He no longer was physically present.

3. FOCUS ON OTHERS (MARK 10:42-45)

Verse 42: *Jesus called them over and said to them, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles dominate them, and their men of high positions exercise power over them."*

Jesus addressed the crisis that arose because of selfish ambition among the Twelve. He gathered them around Him so all could hear Him. He drew a sharp contrast between the pagan concept of greatness and true greatness in God's kingdom. The Greek term rendered *regarded as rulers* could express irony: Pagan rulers only appeared to rule; God actually rules. Jesus used strong terms to describe pagan rulers. The word translated *exercise power* has the sense of tyrannical rule. Pagan rulers were absolute masters whom their people served. The phrase *their men of high positions* literally is "their great ones."

Verse 43: *But it must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,*

The word *but* introduces a sharp contrast between the pagan view of greatness and life in God's kingdom. Another Greek term for *but* (on the contrary) strengthens the contrast. Jesus stressed that anyone aspiring to greatness among His followers must be a servant to others. We get our word *deacon* from the Greek word rendered *servant*. The term expresses the activity of personal ministry for others' best interests. It refers to such menial tasks as waiting on tables.

Verse 44: *and whoever wants to be first among you must be a slave to all.*

To stress the priority of service among His followers, Jesus said that anyone wanting to be first ("greatest, of highest rank or honor") must be a slave ("bond servant") to all. Whereas the term "servant" (10:43) expressed the activity of ministry, *slave* indicated the permanent relationship of servitude. Thus Jesus' followers are to relate to one another consistently as servants and are to be busy serving.

Verse 45: *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many."*

Jesus already had provided a consistent model of service for His disciples. Even though He was the Son of Man—Deity in human flesh—He did not come to receive others' service but to serve. He soon would demonstrate the supreme act of service by voluntarily giving His life as a ransom for many. The Greek term rendered *ransom* referred to the price paid for liberating captives or slaves. In the Septuagint, a major Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the word was used for the tax adult Israelite males paid for their redemption. It also was used for the price paid to redeem the Israelites' firstborn and to buy back mortgaged property. The Greek word translated *for* has the idea of exchange: "in place of." Jesus gave His life to free people enslaved by sin. He well may have had in mind Isaiah 53:10, where the prophet wrote that God would make the Suffering Servant "a restitution offering." In fact, behind Jesus' words may have been the Servant's suffering on others' behalf detailed in Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

The word *ransom* emphasized the price paid for freedom. Of course, the idea is not that Jesus paid Satan or God to set people free. The emphasis is that He provided redemption at the cost of His own life, which He gave voluntarily, willingly. Jesus freely gave His life so that people who place their faith in Him will live. The word *many* does not convey the sense of some but not all. Rather, it has the idea of all,

who are numerous. Jesus gave His life to free all people from slavery to sin, but individuals must place their faith in Him to be redeemed. All who do so receive forgiveness and new life grounded in grace. Jesus called His disciples not to exercise power over others but to serve them. In the economy of God's kingdom, service equals success.