



NURTURING YOUR FAITH:

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# *Patient Urgency*

## Map, Means, Model

Welcome to *Nurturing Your Faith*. This five-part study engages the Gospel according to Mark as a map, a means, and a model the Holy Spirit uses to make Jesus' followers into people who "fish" for other people (see Mark 1:17). But, in our time, many Christians are reluctant to engage in spiritual conversations (dialogue about God, faith, or lack of faith). Many feel ill-equipped to speak of Jesus in everyday situations. This study will help participants become more eager to experience the blessings of spiritual conversations and patiently urgent for more people to participate in God's kingdom coming in Jesus.

### A MAP FOR KINGDOM EXPANSION

In Mark's ancient biography of Jesus, we can discern the beginnings of a map that traces the expansion of God's rule and reign around the world. It launches, not from a palace or a fortress, but a wilderness (see Mark 1:3). Mark follows God's map, beginning in the same geographical wilderness through which ancient Israel wandered (see Exodus 16, Deuteronomy 8:15-16). The Kingdom journey starts in a wasteland, where the ground is barren, and God's people have fallen. God meets His people *there*. And He makes a way. In Jesus, barren ground turns green (see Mark 6:35, 39; compare Isaiah 35:1-2). The blind see. The deaf hear. The mute speak. Even death will be undone. From the wilderness, from the cross, from the Crucified—God's people renewed in the risen Jesus expand the Kingdom to the nations (see Mark 13:10), "everywhere," in every direction (see Mark 1:28).

How does God's kingdom expand? Mark's Gospel offers both a geographical map and a metaphorical one. A metaphor is a word-picture. Metaphors supply images for things that are hard to imagine, such as God's kingdom expansion. Jesus gives many images for how the Kingdom comes. It's a net thrown (see Mark 1:16), a seed sown (see Mark 4:15), a light shown (see Mark 4:21), and even a burglar! The Kingdom-bringer plunders the strong man's stolen goods and makes them his own (see Mark 3:27). These images create a colorful, mental "map" of the many ways the Kingdom comes.



### REFLECT

Of those metaphors for God's kingdom expansion—fishing with a net, planting seeds in the ground, lighting a house with a lamp, or a break-in by a burglar—which is easiest for you to picture in your mind? What experiences does the image evoke for you?

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Why do you think Jesus uses so many metaphors in His teaching? What advantages does this offer in communication? What are the risks?

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## THE MEANS FOR KINGDOM EXPANSION

Many metaphors, however, express a single *means*: God's Word (see Mark 4:14). God rules and reigns by His Word. Jesus brings the Kingdom because He speaks God's Word. He can speak God's Word with authority because He is God's beloved Son (see Mark 9:7). When He speaks, and when people listen, He brings them into God's family (see Mark 3:35). Then, He puts the Word in them, so that they may speak and bring others into God's gracious rule and reign (see Mark 3:14; 13:9-11). Kingdom-expansion is urgent! Those who refuse to listen will lose everything (see Mark 4:25). There is no time to waste. The Word must go out.

Jesus is up for the task (see Mark 1:38). His disciples? Not so much. They don't understand (see Mark 8:21). They're starting to see the Kingdom, but it's still a little blurry (see Mark 8:24). They stumble and fall (see Mark 14:27). They need His Word as much as anyone else: "Go, tell His disciples ... that He is going before you" (see Mark 16:7).

Today, Jesus keeps meeting His followers right where they are—in the wilderness; believing but doubting (see Mark 9:24); seeing, but not all the way; going, yet still gripped by fear (see Mark 16:8). His saving Word is not only for others. It's for us, for me, for you. Jesus gives an urgent task: "Speak the Word!" And He patiently performs the task for us, and in us: "Hear My Word." Again and again and again.

### REFLECT

Read **Mark 13:5-13**, and reflect on the following questions:

Listening to Jesus in Mark 13:5-13, where do you sense His urgency? How do His words also convey His patience and offer hope?

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Considering our calling to expand God's kingdom, what do you need from Jesus now—more patience, or more urgency? Why?

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Watch the video at [lhm.org/studies](http://lhm.org/studies) by Dr. Michael Zeigler



## REFLECT

What was something from the video that stood out to you?

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What steps will you take to rise to Dr. Zeigler’s challenge and listen to the entire Gospel of Mark? (Do you have access to an audio Bible? Do you have an opportunity this week? Will you listen on your own or with a group? Will you listen on a walk or while driving or doing chores?)

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## A MODEL FOR KINGDOM EXPANSION

In Mark’s biography of Jesus, we hear God’s Son model patient urgency with His disciples. Jesus is urgent for His Father’s coming Kingdom, yet patient with the process by which it comes. He patiently converses with His followers on the journey and urges them to take the next step with Him. Wherever people are, Jesus meets them there. And He meets us, mapping the journey before us, and providing the means to complete it. He is patiently urgent with us, and models patient urgency for us. We follow Him, engaging others in spiritual conversations for the sake of God’s coming Kingdom.

Having a “spiritual conversation” with someone—what does that look like and sound like? A spiritual conversation is a type of “deeper” conversation. It begins in “small” talk about daily happenings. We call it small talk, but we shouldn’t think it’s unimportant. It is vital! It builds rapport and fosters trust. When trust is present and time doesn’t feel rushed, spiritual conversationalists will go deeper. Each person is already immersed in the story of their own life. If conditions are right, they are willing and sometimes eager to talk about it. When at least one of those persons maps their life-journey immersed in Jesus’ story, Jesus will more naturally enter the conversation. That’s because people tend to talk about the stories they’re immersed in and further immerse themselves in the stories they talk about.

As followers of Jesus, we know it takes time to build trust and venture into deeper conversations with others. We know we must be patient. And this patience is invigorated with urgency because Jesus’ story isn’t just one among many other equally interesting options. He is the Creator, Judge, and King over all stories. His is *the* story that makes ours possible, the final ending to every story, whether we realize it or not. And so, we follow Him. We learn to recognize Him not only as the central Character of our story and the Model for our lives, but also the Author—the One who is actively, urgently, patiently molding us into His image.

Are you ready to take the next steps with Jesus?

- Ask God to help you experience more of the blessings of spiritual conversations.
- Devote time preparing for future conversations by immersing yourself in Mark's Gospel.

 Get a jump-start on listening to Mark by viewing the bonus video at [lhm.org/studies](http://lhm.org/studies) by Dr. Michael Zeigler: "A Dramatic Re-telling of Mark 1:1-2:12"

## REFLECT

What was one word or phrase that stayed with you from Mark 1:1-2:12?

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How is God speaking to you through this word?

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## PRAY

*Dear Father, Your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Let the words and deeds of Your beloved Son, Jesus, take root in our hearts, so that we may bear abundant fruit for Your kingdom, through the Messiah, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.*

### MORE INFO

For additional information on the Gospel of Mark and having spiritual conversations, consider the following online resources:

**1. Gospel of Mark Movie**

*A live-action presentation of Mark's Gospel, with actors portraying the events and conversations while a narrator reads the text, word for word.*

- [youtube.com/watch?v=rh9yjReuWH0](https://youtube.com/watch?v=rh9yjReuWH0)

**2. Gospel of Mark – Performed Live by Max McLean**

*A solo performance of Mark's Gospel by renowned actor, Max McLean.*

- [youtube.com/playlist?list=PLz7sbgsselWMIDnxcTORi4BS5792r0Ta3](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLz7sbgsselWMIDnxcTORi4BS5792r0Ta3)

**3. Free Online Audio Bibles**

*Choose from over 10 versions of free audio Bibles in English (plus other languages).*

- [biblegateway.com/resources/audio](http://biblegateway.com/resources/audio)
- [open.spotify.com/search/audio%20bible](https://open.spotify.com/search/audio%20bible)

**4. Audio Bibles Available for Purchase and Download**

- [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)
- [audible.com](http://audible.com)

## Meet Them Where They Are

In the first session of this study, we engaged the Gospel according to Mark as a map, a means, and a model that God's Spirit uses to help disciples of Jesus become people who "fish" for other people (see Mark 1:17). Mark's Gospel geographically maps the expansion of God's rule and reign, beginning from the cross of Jesus and spreading to all nations. Mark's Gospel, as God's Word, is also part of the means God uses to bring the Kingdom. Session one focused on relying on God's means by communally engaging Mark's Gospel as an immersive narrative. This session will focus on Mark's Gospel as a model for engaging others in "spiritual conversation."

### MEETING OTHERS WHERE THEY ARE

Jesus asks questions. As you and your group continue to "binge-listen" to Mark, try counting them. How many questions does He ask? Sometimes He asks the same question twice. For example, twice He asks His disciples, "How many loaves do you have?" (Mark 6:38b, 8:5b). Another question He asks twice is "What do you want Me to do for you?" Read the following passage where this occurs. Note the "Who?, What?, Where?, When?, and Why?" behind the question in each case (see Mark 10:36, 51). To *whom* does Jesus ask the question? In the narrative, *what* has just been happening? In their journey, *where* are they? In the conversation, *when* does the question come up? And *why* does Jesus ask it?



### REFLECT

Read **Mark 10:35-52**, and reflect on these questions:

What insights did you gain by analyzing the who, what, where, when, and why behind Jesus' double question, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

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Considering this case in light of the many other questions Jesus asks in Mark's Gospel, how would you characterize Jesus' overarching approach or motive for asking questions?

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Watch Dr. Michael Zeigler's Session Two video, titled "Mark and The Odyssey," at [lhm.org/studies](http://lhm.org/studies).



### REFLECT

What was something from the video that stood out to you?

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How would you state the main point of the video?

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In what ways do you want to model Jesus' conversational approach?

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## WHERE WE ARE NOW

Among Americans in general, spiritual conversations don't happen with much frequency. "Fewer than one in 10 talks about God, faith, religion or spirituality even once a week (8%)," and "the average adult says they only have about one spiritual conversation a year." <sup>1</sup> Do you see this as a problem? Maybe so. But today, fewer Christians feel their responsibility to do something about it. According to the Barna Group research just quoted, "In 1993, nine out of 10 Christians agreed that 'every Christian has a responsibility to share their faith'" (89%). Today, just two-thirds say so (64%) ... a 25-point drop." <sup>2</sup> If you've been binge-listening to Mark's Gospel, you know how regrettable this is. Jesus urges His followers to "bear witness" about Him. The Gospel must be proclaimed "to all nations" (see Mark 13:9-10). Christ-followers must become *people-fishers* (see Mark 1:17; also Colossians 4:5-6; 1 Peter 3:15). American Christians may be deficient in this area, but there is good news for us in Mark's account of Jesus. When His followers don't get it, He doesn't give up on them. He meets us where we are. He gives the means to move us forward. And to prompt us forward, we can imagine Him asking us this question: "What do you want Me to do for you?"

There is more good news. Data from the Barna study quoted above also suggests that non-Christians are open to having more spiritual conversations. This shouldn't surprise us. Even the most secular culture has deep-seated spiritual longings. God made us that way! So, if non-Christians are open to having faith conversations, with whom would they like to talk? Pastors? Church professionals? Their overwhelming answer was "No" (at least not initially). In the survey, when Barna asked non-Christians to pick options for potential spiritual conversation partners, less than one in 10 selected "a cleric or religious professional." But more than half picked "a friend."

Why are non-Christians more open to speaking of spiritual things with a friend? Remember that a spiritual conversation is about deeper matters. In every person's life, under the surface, there are unresolved tensions, unanswered questions, unfulfilled longings, unspeakable sins, and unrelenting fears. To speak about such things invites vulnerability. For some people, they are embarrassed to admit their inadequacies. Others are afraid of being condemned or diminished. And some simply don't want to impose themselves on someone they don't know. Each person approaches spiritual matters from a unique perspective. Whatever their perspective, it always involves risk. Like closing your eyes, crossing your arms, and falling backwards into the hands of the person behind you, a spiritual conversation requires trust. That's why people today look to their friends. Like it or not, our culture has lost trust in religious institutions and those who formally represent them. But people still trust their friends. They know that a friend is someone who seeks to understand you. A friend values you as you are. A friend meets you where you're at.

<sup>1</sup> *Spiritual Conversations in The Digital Age*, Barna Report produced in partnership with Lutheran Hour Ministries (2018), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

## REFLECT

Which insights regarding spiritual conversations that you learned above stood out to you?

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What have been your experiences of spiritual conversations?

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## NOT LEAVING US THERE

Friends meet us where we're at, but they don't approve of everything we do. Do you have any friends who approve of your every decision? My dog may come close, but sometimes even *he* is unhappy with my actions. One of our culture's deficiencies is confusion about what it means to truly be a friend, and to love someone as a friend. Approval is not the same thing as love. Approval cannot equal love, especially for the follower of Jesus. We'll talk more about this in upcoming sessions. As you continue to binge-listen to Mark's Gospel, note how patiently Jesus meets people where they are. In fact, for those who appear furthest from the Kingdom, who know the least about God's will, who are most out of step with God's ways—for them, Jesus often extends an extra measure of patience (see Mark 2:13-17, 6:34). At the same time, observe how urgently He disapproves of people's decisions and actions that bring harm to themselves or to others (see Mark 2:8, 17, 25, 3:5, 28-29, 7:6-7, 18-23, and 8:16-21).

It is often with those closest to Him that Jesus expresses His most urgent disapproval. Remember Mark 8:33? At the same time, it's also with those closest to Him that He displays His perfect patience (see Mark 14:27-28, 16:7; compare this to 1 Timothy 1:15-16). Jesus is always leading them and us to take the next step forward with Him, to turn back to God (repent), and to believe (again) the good news of God's coming kingdom (see Mark 1:14-15).

Immersed in Mark's biography of Jesus, you'll see Him model God's perfect, patient urgency. Jesus is patient with people and urgent for the Kingdom. When everyone else is in a hurry, He pauses to ask a question (see Mark 5:30). When people want Him to stay put, He presses on (see Mark 1:38). Mapping His ways can get confusing. Which is it, Jesus? Patience or urgency? But remember, we're *not* following a predictable program. We're following a Person—the Person who promises to meet us in His Word, wherever we are. Speaking of the Word, let's talk about bingeing Mark again ...

 REFLECT

How did you listen to Mark's Gospel this week? What's your plan for next week?

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How would you answer Jesus' question, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

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 PRAY

*Dear Jesus, You once asked people, "What do you want Me to do for you?" How should we answer? We keenly feel our longings and sense our deficiencies. So, we simply ask that You meet us again in Your Word and lead us on the way. Fill us with Your Spirit, so that we can meet others, loving them like You love us. Amen.*

## *An Urgent Message*

### INTRODUCTION

We are continuing to reorient our thoughts, words, and actions toward Jesus as He is revealed by the Holy Spirit through the verbally performed text of the Gospel according to Mark. Have you devoted time to listening to the entire story all the way through at least once? If so, don't stop! Listen again, and again, and again. Mark's Gospel becomes more rewarding with each hearing. Consider the experience of David Rhoads. In the late 1970s, he began memorizing the entire Gospel of Mark. Over the next 15 years, he verbally performed Mark's Gospel from memory for gathered audiences nearly 200 times. Accounting for memory work and practice, he said, "I have probably gone over Mark more than 500 times."<sup>1</sup> So, did he get sick of it—after that many times? No. He found that Mark gets richer, deeper, and more profound as it is repeated and shared with others. As this study continues, listen to all of Mark at least once a week, or more. As you do, ask the Holy Spirit to give you ears to hear. Like a concert-goer immersed in the experience of the music, let yourself be immersed in the world of Mark's story—the world in which God is present in everything, where Jesus is King, and the whole creation is being reclaimed for His kingdom. In other words, let yourself get caught up in the real world.



### REFLECT

Discuss with your group or write in a journal: listening to Mark's Gospel, have you noticed anything new or gained a deeper appreciation of something? What insights or questions has it raised for you?

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Do you have a favorite moment in the Gospel? Picture the scene and re-tell it. Why does this part speak to you?

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## MARK'S "THEME"

David Rhoads' adventure to learn Mark's Gospel and share it with others has inspired many. Maybe not to memorize the whole thing, but to listen to Mark's book (and the other Gospels) as a singular story. So, if the Gospel of Mark is a single story, then what holds it together? What is its theme? A Bible scholar named David Garland surveyed several possible answers. Mark's account addresses such themes as kingship, discipleship, secrecy, mission, and salvation. We might also add "Patient Urgency," which is the "theme" for the study of Mark you're in now. Many passages could be cited as evidence for any of these answers to the question about Mark's theme. However, there's a deeper insight we shouldn't overlook. As David Garland observed, "This gospel was not intended by its author to be a vessel of theological truths waiting to be quarried." Instead, it is **"a story in which Jesus is the central figure."**<sup>2</sup> Put simply, Jesus is the theme. Mark isn't offering a religious idea or rulebook, but a biography. He's introducing us to a friend. And the introduction is urgent because this Friend is also the eternal Son of the God, the Creator of the universe who showed up on earth to put the world right again. In the very first line, Mark tells us that this is "the Good News about Jesus" (Mark 1:1b). The first words we hear from God aren't directed toward us at all (at least not explicitly). They are all about Jesus, uniquely for Him and to Him: "You are My beloved Son, with You I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11b). Then, Jesus' initial call to His first disciples isn't "study this topic," or "learn these truths," or "complete these tasks," but simply, "follow Me" (Mark 1:17b), a call that continues to others (see Mark 2:14, 10:21, 10:52). Great crowds do come to hear Jesus teach, but many miss the point. It's only those who linger and stay close to Him who have "the mystery of the kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11b). It's only those seated in a circle around Him who are doing God's will (see Mark 3:34-35). It's only those reaching out in faith to touch Him who are healed (see Mark 5:28-29). And when the mountaintop fireworks fade, the disciples see Him only. Read that scene aloud in Mark 9:1-8, and reflect on the following questions:

 REFLECT

This is the second and last time we hear God, the Father, speak in Mark's Gospel. His final words are simple: "Listen to Him." Recalling some of the words you've been hearing Jesus speak in the Gospel, what are you needing to hear from Him at this time?

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Some think the goal of "evangelism" is to get people to cross a boundary from unsaved to saved (or from non-member to member in a church). There is a place for that idea, but God's voice from the cloud for the disciples, and by extension, for the world, is less about boundary crossing and more about orientation: orient yourself toward Jesus, hear Him, give Him your attention. How might this expand the way you understand the goal of "witnessing" and "evangelism"?

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 Watch the video by Dr. Michael Zeigler: Session 3 – "Point to Jesus" at [lhm.org/studies](http://lhm.org/studies)

What was something from the video that stood out to you?

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What's the difference between "giving a sales pitch" and "pointing people to a good friend"?

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## JESUS IS LIFE

Pointing people to Jesus is urgent. But it's not a sales pitch. We are inviting people into a lifelong relationship, not a one-time transaction. Coming to trust in Him can be abrupt, instantly illuminating, like striking a match, as with the man whom Jesus freed from the legion of demons (see Mark 5:15-20). At the same time, coming to faith and growing in faith is a slow sunrise, a long journey with Jesus. And along the way, His disciples are often clueless, blind, and even resistant (see Mark 8:14-21). Other times, they're only half-seeing and half-believing, half-amazed and half-afraid (see Mark 10:32). Perhaps the man who brought his son to Jesus said it best: "I believe; help my unbelief" (9:24b). Thankfully, Jesus is patient with us. But patience does not mean putting off next steps. Taking the next step forward with Jesus—whatever that may be—is urgent because being with Jesus and listening to Him is life (see Mark 4:14).

In the first half of Mark's Gospel, Jesus performs miracle after miracle in rapid fire succession—healing, driving out demons, forgiving sins, calming storms, feeding thousands, raising the dead—BAM! BOOM! Ka-pow! But, when the fireworks fade, what's the point? The point is, in Jesus we hear and know our Creator. He is the Source of all the good in all the people and in all the things you love. Jesus is the genius behind every musician, the talent in every artist, the love in every life-giving relationship. He is the Word by whom it all came into being. And He has come to bind the devil (see Mark 3:22-27), to take back God's house, restore it, make it new again, even at the cost of His life. But if you won't take the next step with Him, if you close your ears and stop listening to Him—you will lose everything (see Mark 4:24-25). And without Jesus, all that's left is hell (see Mark 9:42-50).

What keeps Christians from feeling this urgency to point people to Jesus? For many, it sounds offensive to say that Jesus is the only way to be saved from hell and to have eternal life. From a certain perspective, it even sounds like a barbaric thing to believe. But if we live in His story, we come to understand His perspective on eternal life. No one can have true life without Him because following Jesus, trusting Jesus, being with Jesus and His people—that is the essence of eternal life, both now, and "in the age to come" (see Mark 10:29-30). Suppose I didn't want to go with Jesus, yet still have eternal life. That would be like wanting a wedding party without a marriage; like wanting to be adopted without a family; like wanting a friend without giving up any of my "me time." Why? Because eternal life is the expression and celebration of being with Jesus. It may be a hard truth for some to hear. But, in Jesus, we can say it as the deepest, most urgent expression of love; (see how He did it in Mark 10:21). You can't have a wedding party unless the groom shows up (see Mark 2:19). And you can't have true life unless Jesus shows up. And He did show up. So, our message is urgent. We must share His story with everyone, everywhere (see Mark 13:10).

## CONCLUSION

In the New Testament, we have four inspired biographies of Jesus. When we immerse ourselves in them (or just one of them, such as Mark's Gospel), we come to know and love Jesus more deeply. We are reminded that our message to others is not primarily a set of rules to keep or a theological argument to accept, but a Person to follow. And not just any person, but the greatest Friend, the central figure in God's story, a story we're invited to enter. This is our message.



*Dear Jesus, Your death on the cross was the sacrifice that put the world right. And You rose from the dead to bring all people back to You and Your Father. Without You there is no good thing. We believe. Help us in our unbelief. Send us Your Spirit. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and mouths to speak so that all would turn to You and have life in Your Name, because You live and You reign with the Father and the same Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> David Rhoads, "Performing the Gospel of Mark," in *Body and the Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical Narratives*, edited by Björn Krondorfer (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992), 103.

<sup>2</sup> David Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel: Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 42.

## *Living the Paradox*

### INTRODUCTION

The goal of this five-part study is to invest time and energy into preparing for spiritual conversations by immersing ourselves in the Gospel of Mark's dramatic narrative about Jesus. As followers of Jesus, we map our lives onto His story. Saved by Him and guided by the Holy Spirit, He becomes the model for our character. Meeting Jesus in Mark's Gospel, we've noted two seemingly contradictory aspects of His character. He is driven by an urgent mission. Yet, as the mission takes root, buds, and bears fruit, He is patient with people—though not always with fig trees (see Mark 11:14)! And since the cursed fig tree is an object lesson for the urgency of His mission and His measured impatience when people don't get it (see Mark 6:11 and 9:19)—this highlights the tension in Jesus' paradoxical approach to outreach. The purpose of this session is not to resolve that paradox, but to explore the unintended consequences when we deny either side of it. Noting these consequences will help us hold the tension as we model our lives after Jesus. Following our Lord, we engage others for the sake of God's kingdom. By His Spirit, they will see His patience and urgency in us.

### A PROBLEM TO SOLVE OR A MYSTERY TO EMBRACE?

When we think about character attributes abstractly, we imagine people apart from real-time interactions with others. In the abstract, patience and urgency are contradictory, aren't they? Patience says, "Slow down." Urgency says, "Speed up." Patience says, "Tell the full story. Paint the whole picture." Urgency says, "Get to the point! Bottom line up front!" Without context, it's difficult to imagine ourselves being both patient and urgent at the same time. But in context, we can see ourselves tailoring our response to each unique person within the complex situation before us. For example, we can imagine a mother patiently coaching her son how to tie his shoes, but then urgently shouting at him as he's running into a busy street. Her responses are "paradoxical" only when we think about them in the abstract, apart from context. In real life, we can see how the mother's actions are unified by love for her son. And her love is displayed in seemingly contradictory forms because her son is learning to wisely navigate a dangerous world. And sometimes he behaves like a fool (see Proverbs 22:15). So, mom responds accordingly.

Likewise, Jesus responds to us. The first words we hear from Him are simple and direct. Repent and believe, He says. Now is the time. Don't delay (see Mark 1:15). But we also see Jesus working patiently. Slowly, one conversation at a time, He reveals the full scope of His message about who He is and what He came to do. At least 15 times, Mark's Gospel tells us how Jesus aims to defer or delay the spread of the full truth about His identity and mission (see Mark 1:25, 1:34, 1:44, 3:12, 4:34, 5:43, 7:24, 7:36, 8:12, 8:26, 8:30, 9:9, 9:30, 11:33, 15:5). Eventually, He does want the secret to be shared (see Mark 4:21-22). But sometimes He says, "Wait." He is waiting until the time is right. Even the Gospel-writer, Mark, models this approach. Right away, Mark gives us the bottom line up front: this is "the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). But then he tells us a two-hour long story to show us what that means.

Following Jesus, we can't settle on a simplistic approach for expanding His kingdom. Each hearing of Mark's Gospel strikes us in a different way. Perhaps you listened last week and thought, "I need to stop making excuses. I need to tell more people about Jesus. And I need to start NOW." Or maybe you thought, "I need to slow down and pray more. When I engage others in spiritual conversations, I need to ask more questions. I need to understand, not just to be understood." Both could be faithful responses. When it comes to being a witness for Jesus, there's no one-size-fits-all approach.

## REFLECT

The phrase "patient urgency" expresses a paradox (two clashing truths that can't be reconciled in the abstract, apart from context). How comfortable are you with paradox? Would you describe yourself more as a "black-and-white" person? Or are you comfortable in "gray" areas? Why or why not?

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How do you normally approach a confusing or complex situation? Do you see it as a problem to solve? Or do you see it as a mystery to appreciate? When is one approach more appropriate than the other? What are the strengths and shortcomings of each?

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## HOW MANY INTERACTIONS?

Read aloud the account from Mark 9:14-32. Count the number of interpersonal interactions Jesus has in this section. How many do you count? The first time I counted, I got four: (1) His interaction with the crowd; (2) with the father; (3) with the boy; and (4) with His disciples. But then I looked again. Jesus also interpersonally deals with the unclean spirit. Have you ever had an interaction with a demon? I haven't, at least not that I'm aware of. But, as I'm immersed in Mark's story and beginning to see myself in the universe he's revealing—maybe I should be prepared for such a thing? Okay, so that's a fifth interaction.

But there are more. Note that there's a smaller crowd and a larger one. The smaller crowd rushes over to greet Him (see Mark 9:15). The larger one gathers after the demon seized the boy (see Mark 9:25). And Jesus interacts with each group differently. Also, Jesus is engaging with

His disciples in smaller and larger groups. First, there are the three who were present at Jesus' Transfiguration—Peter, James, and John. Second, there are the other nine who stayed behind (see Mark 9:2, 14). And the disciples sense the distinction: "Why couldn't we cast it out?" That is, why couldn't any of the nine left behind in the "outer circle" get the job done? (compare Mark 9:33-50, 10:35-45). If you were part of the nine, how would you feel about the two circles? Jesus has called each of them by name, but now they seem to perceive themselves as two competing groups.

So, adding all of those groups consisting of several individuals, how many interactions is that for Jesus?

Mark is nudging us to imagine how Jesus deals with every person, group, and sub-group uniquely; He meets them where they are. This is a complex social situation, with many contextual tensions, yet Jesus knows each person intimately (see Mark 2:8; compare Luke 12:7; John 2:24-25; and 1 Corinthians 13:12b). And He confidently and patiently responds to everyone there.

 REFLECT

Noting Jesus' many interactions in Mark 9:14-32, how do you hear His tone of voice when He speaks in verses 16, 19, 21, 23, 25, 29, and 31? Is His tone different in each of these seven instances? If you were to put His tone in two categories: PATIENT and URGENT, which verses would go where? Or is there another category? How do you hear Him?

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As a representative of Jesus (see Galatians 2:20), how does this encourage you to think about your interpersonal interactions with others?

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 Watch the video by Dr. Michael Zeigler: Session 4 - "Illustrating the Paradox" at [lhm.org/studies](http://lhm.org/studies)

 REFLECT

What is the result when we try to resolve the paradox by favoring “urgent mission” over “patient relationship,” or vice versa?

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Do you have an example of when you have lived this paradox more or less faithfully?

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CONCLUSION

Which should come first? A patient relationship or an urgent mission? We could try to pick one and resolve the paradox. Or we could follow Jesus and embrace the tension with Him. Doing so, it's not a matter of putting one over the other, but of putting Jesus first in both. Without the urgency of God's mission, our relationships become self-serving. We are like foreign ambassadors behaving as tourists, forgetting who sent us and why we're here. Without patience in relationships, our mission becomes manipulation. We dehumanize people. We handle them like objects. We are like “friends” who call only when they want something for themselves, forgetting that our mission is relationships, and relationships are our mission. We avoid both errors when we let Jesus and His coming kingdom be first in every relationship. Remember, Jesus was willing to die for each person before you. He knows them intimately—every thought and feeling. And He counts the number of hairs on their head. He knows their need for Him is urgent. And He's patiently working to save them—as He's doing for each of us.<sup>1</sup>

 PRAY

*Dear Jesus, “You strove with Satan, and You won; Your faithfulness endured; Lend us Your nerve; Your skill and trust in God’s Eternal Word.”<sup>2</sup> Amen.*

<sup>1</sup>Claudia Hernaman, “O Lord, throughout These Forty Days,” in *The Lutheran Service Book*, hymn no. 418, v. 2 (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

<sup>2</sup>Note how the apostle Paul can speak (paradoxically) of a Christian's salvation as something completed in the past, an ongoing work in progress, and a reality still to come, in the future. See Romans 5:9 and 1 Corinthians 3:15 (future tense, “will be saved”); 1 Corinthians 1:18 and 15:2 (present tense, “being saved”); and Ephesians 2:8 (past tense, “have been saved”).

## *Suspended Endings*

### INTRODUCTION

In 1428, a 21-year-old Italian poet named Maffeo Vegio added a new ending to the *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* was written by Virgil. Its origin story of ancient Rome was a bedrock of Western culture. So, who does Vegio think he is—adding a new ending? That's like adding a moustache to the Mona Lisa!

Now, Vegio didn't exactly deface Virgil's *Aeneid*. Although, some critics considered it a big mistake. Still, maybe we should cut Mr. Vegio some slack? Many have noted the abruptness of Virgil's ending. The poem's last anticlimactic line is a scant description of the villain's death, like ending *The Wizard of Oz* with the wicked witch shouting, "I'm melting!" Roll the credits. And we never see *if* Dorothy and Toto made it home or *who* that man behind the curtain was. So, maybe we shouldn't be too hard on young Vegio.

Maybe Virgil had a reason for his abrupt ending? Like Da Vinci had a reason for Mona Lisa's inscrutable expression. The *Aeneid*'s conclusion has been called a "suspended ending" by scholars—an ending that leaves you in suspense, and with questions: Does the hero win the war? Does he marry the girl? The *Aeneid* doesn't say. This seems deliberate. The author isn't merely reporting what happened; he's involving his audience in the dilemma, putting them in the scene, so that they—like the poem's characters—must wrestle with whatever comes next.

Perhaps the author of the Gospel of Mark did something similar. Most modern-day Bibles, between Mark chapter 16, verses 8 and 9, have a note like this: "Some of the earliest biblical manuscripts do not contain verses 9–20." Here are three possible explanations:

1. Verses 9–20 were Mark's intended ending, but they got separated from the earliest manuscripts; *or*
2. Mark's original ending was lost. Then, years later, some zealous Christian, feeling the ending was too abrupt, used other scriptural source materials (e.g., Matthew, Luke, John, and Acts) to add his own ending, like young Vegio did for Virgil; *or*
3. Mark wanted to stop at verse 8, after the angel announced that Jesus is risen from the dead and instructed the women to tell His disciples, ending the narrative, as one translation has it: "*And they said nothing to anyone. They were afraid, you know.*"<sup>1</sup>

## A BRIEF EXCURSUS ON HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

For Christians who trust that the Bible is inspired by God and without error, the fact that there's uncertainty about Mark's ending is not a problem. What we're talking about here are not biblical errors, but the complicated, historical process by which the Bible has come to us. Today's Bibles are a patchwork puzzle of about 5,000 different-sized pieces. These "pieces" are the ancient manuscripts and related fragments. Note: ancient texts are put together by comparing all of these pieces. And the Bible has the *most*—thousands more than any other text—making it the most reliable ancient book in existence.

But sometimes the pieces don't fit or are missing. However, we still hold the Bible as inspired and without error—not because all the pieces fit perfectly, but because of the picture of Jesus the Bible gives us. The Bible gives us all we need to know of Jesus to trust Him and be saved, to follow Him faithfully now and to have life in His Name forever (see John 5:39, 20:31; 2 Timothy 3:15-16; Romans 15:4). The Bible is *perfect* in this sense—perfect in its power to bring us to saving faith in Him and increasing faithfulness toward Him. So, if Mark's ending leaves us in suspense, we can trust it was for a faith-inducing purpose.

## UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

To review, a suspended ending is one that "does not include important elements of a story that a reader or hearer might come to expect to find in the narrative."<sup>2</sup> For example, the Old Testament book of Jonah ends with a question God puts to the pouting prophet: *Shouldn't I be concerned with Nineveh—that great city with all its confused people, and helpless animals? Shouldn't I have pity on them?* The narrative doesn't say what happens next.

But we, as interested readers, expect more. We want to hear if Jonah has a change of heart since the narrative has already told us about Jonah's earlier change of heart in chapters 2 and 3. Plus, if we know the larger story of Scripture—how Jonah's book has a place in the biblical canon, and how Jesus speaks favorably of Jonah (see Matthew 12:39-41, 16:4), and how Jonah presumably had a change of heart, since he went on to write the book (who else could provide these details?)— we expect to hear Jonah's answer. But the ending is suspended. It leaves us hanging.

### REFLECT

Read the book of Jonah; (it will take about 15 minutes). How does Jonah's suspended ending affect you as a listener?

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What unanswered questions or unresolved problems does it raise for you?

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Read Luke 15:11-32. It's another famous suspended ending in Scripture. What hopes or expectations does the narrative raise but not fulfill?

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If the elder brother represents the Pharisees and Law teachers (see Luke 15:2), and we know from Scripture that many Pharisees did have a change of heart toward Jesus (see John 3:1, 19:39; Acts 15:5; Philippians 3:5), how does this background knowledge of the story help us engage with the parable's suspended ending?

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## LOOK AGAIN!

If the Holy Spirit inspired a suspended ending for Mark, what might be the faith-inducing purpose? Perhaps He wants us to look again, like returning to ponder a great work of art, or a sunset, or a story. Perhaps our Lord wants to provoke wonder and gratitude, to prompt questions that lead into conversations and deeper relationships—with Him and with each other. A suspended ending is an invitation to ask questions.

Let's compare Virgil's *Aeneid* with Mark's Gospel. "The *Aeneid* of Virgil has an ending that ... strikingly resembles the suddenness of Mark 16:8 in the abruptness of its ending and in its omission of important elements of the whole story."<sup>3</sup> The first hearers of Mark's Gospel would have known the bigger story. They would have known the women at Jesus' tomb had a change of heart, that they struggled through their fears, breaking through their momentary silence. Otherwise, they wouldn't be here, as followers of Jesus, listening to his story.

Likewise, Romans hearing Virgil's epic about Aeneas would have known the bigger story. They would have known that Aeneas went on to win the war, marry the girl, and found the city that became Rome. Otherwise, they wouldn't be there listening to his story. But Virgil leaves them suspended when their hero is at a low point. Normally a man of honor, Aeneas turns into a villain, heartlessly murdering his defenseless, defeated enemy who's begging for mercy. "The poem ends with confusion, with paradox; the poet would have us ponder." <sup>4</sup> This is part of what makes Virgil's work great. He involves "his readers in a dilemma." <sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Mark did want to end his Gospel with "They said nothing to anyone. They were afraid, you know?" If so, how is he inviting us into the disciples' dilemma? How is he helping us identify with them in their fear and weakness?



Watch the video by Dr. Michael Zeigler: Session 5 - "Lead with Weakness" at [lhm.org/studies](http://lhm.org/studies)



## REFLECT

What keeps you from being a stronger witness for Jesus?

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If you were with the women at the tomb, what would have pushed you to speak up despite your fear? What has helped you speak up in the past?

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## FISHING FOR AN ENDING

Perhaps Vegio did commit a dramatic mistake. Or was he taking Virgil's bait? By leaving the reader dangling, isn't the author of a suspended ending *fishing* for the hearer to finish the story? If so, Virgil caught Vegio in his net. Vegio became involved in the dilemma and felt compelled to continue the story.

If some well-meaning Christ-follower later added verses 9-20 to Mark's Gospel, we don't need to merely criticize. Instead, we could be inspired to enter more deeply into the disciples' dilemma. Perhaps we could continue Jesus' story with our lives? We could venture back into the narrative to discover more, not just as hearers, but as characters and co-creators in God's ongoing Gospel story for the world. Taking Mark's bait, we could become people-fishers.

 Watch part two of the video by Dr. Michael Zeigler: Session 5 – “Mark’s Suspended Ending” at [lhm.org/studies](http://lhm.org/studies)

 REFLECT

What was one word or phrase that stayed with you from Mark 14:27-72, 15:40-16:8?

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How is God “fishing” for you through this Word?

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 PRAY

*Dear Father, You send Your Spirit to bring us through our fears. Help us to love and serve and speak with patient urgency, each as You have called us. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.*

**Endnotes**

1 James W. Voelz and Christopher W. Mitchell, *Concordia Commentary: Mark 8:27–16:20* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 1195.

2 David Lewis, “Suspended Endings in Ancient Literature: A Comparison of The Gospel of Mark with Homer’s Iliad and Virgil’s Aeneid” (*Concordia Journal*, Spring 2024, Vol. 50, No. 2), 45.

3 *Ibid.*, 50.

4 A.S. Gratwich, “The Aeneid,” in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature: Vol. II*, ed. E. J. Kenney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 353, quoted in Lewis, “Suspended Endings,” 55.

5 *Ibid.*, 55.



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