

Before you read on

Jesus was a Jew, born at a time when Israel was part of the Roman Empire, which had installed a man named Herod as its puppet king. Jews called people from any other nations 'Gentiles.'

Everyday Jewish life was controlled by the nation's religious leaders: a small elite of priests, teachers of the Jewish Law, and temple bureaucrats. They were divided into two main parties

- *the Pharisees, whose main focus was to maintain what they believed to be the purity of Jewish worship, even though they themselves had added countless rules and regulations of their own to the original law taught by Moses*
- *the Sadducees, whose main focus was to avoid upsetting the Romans, opting to collaborate with their occupiers for a quiet life.*

Some of these religious rulers genuinely sought to honour God and serve their people. But many loved to think they were superior to everyone else, and a significant number opposed Jesus' message about God's Kingdom from the start. They were the very people who should have welcomed Jesus with open arms, but, sadly, they were more concerned with their own status and privileged position within society than in seeing God's Kingdom established.

Jesus challenged their whole view of life, with its 'thou shalt not' insistence on rules for rules' sake. Instead, he reminded them of God's compassion, and longing to welcome everyone who wanted to see earth look more like heaven.

Each week, the Jews observed a Day of Rest, called the Sabbath, which the religious leaders enforced with a strictness God himself had never intended, reducing what God had designed to be a blessing to everyone to one long list of rules to keep. You will notice that Jesus regularly found himself on the wrong side of the religious authorities by responding to people's needs rather than respecting their petty rules.

Mark Chapter 1

¹ Good news! God has sent his son, Jesus, to be the Saviour of the world. ² Centuries before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah recorded God's promise:

'a herald will announce your coming; ³ his voice will echo across the desert: "Roll out the red carpet for your Saviour; remove everything which might hinder his arrival."'

⁴ John appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, baptising people with the simple message – everyone needs to ask God's forgiveness for their sins. ⁵ Crowds flocked to him from town and countryside, admitting their wrongdoing and demonstrating their desire for a fresh start by being baptised in the river Jordan. ⁶ John wore animal skins and ate whatever the desert provided. ⁷ But he was always clear that he was not the main act. Over and over again he told people, 'The Saviour is on his way. Next to him I'm nothing. ⁸ My water baptism is little more than a down-payment on the filling with God's Spirit he will bring.'

⁹ Jesus himself came to John and was baptised by him. ¹⁰ Stepping out of the river, Jesus saw the veil between earth and heaven pulled open and the Holy Spirit resting on him in the form of a dove. ¹¹ God's voice declared, 'My son, I want you to know how much I love you – you're my heart's delight.' ¹² The Holy Spirit then drove Jesus deep into the desert, ¹³ where Satan tempted him for forty days, observed only by wild animals and angels.

¹⁴ Some while later, John the Baptist was thrown into prison, and Jesus returned to Galilee, telling people about the good news God had sent him to proclaim. ¹⁵ 'Today's the day. God's Kingdom is only a heartbeat away. Turn away from sin and put your faith in this good news.'

¹⁶ Walking beside Lake Galilee one day, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, fishing. ¹⁷ 'Follow me', he told them, 'and I'll find you bigger fish to catch'. ¹⁸ Dropping their nets, they followed him. ¹⁹ A little further on he saw two more brothers, James and John, also fishermen. ²⁰ He called them too, and leaving their father in the boat with their employees, they also joined Jesus.

²¹ Jesus and his new followers went to a town called Capernaum, and on the Jewish Day of Rest Jesus went into the synagogue and started to teach. ²² The people were astounded at his authority, which put their usual preachers in the shade.

²³ As Jesus was speaking, a man oppressed by an evil spirit screamed at him, ²⁴ 'Are you here to kill us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know you ... Son of God!'

²⁵ 'Silence!' commanded Jesus. 'Get out of him now!' ²⁶ The evil spirit shook the man as if he were a rag doll and came out of him screaming. ²⁷ Those watching were now almost speechless: 'Did you see that?! His teaching's not just new ... it works! Even evil spirits do what he says.' ²⁸ The news spread like wildfire across the whole region.

²⁹ Jesus left the synagogue for Simon and Andrew's home. ³⁰ Hearing that Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed ³¹ Jesus took her hand and the fever left her instantly.

³²⁻³³ That evening, the whole town crowded round the house, bringing the sick and those tormented by evil spirits to Jesus. ³⁴ He healed many of their diseases, and drove out many evil spirits – but commanded them not to reveal his identity.

³⁵ In the quiet hours before dawn the next day, Jesus left the house and found a place to be alone, so that he could pray to his Father. ³⁶ When Simon and the others found him, ³⁷ they told him 'The whole town's looking for you!'

³⁸ 'We need to move on to other villages,' Jesus told them. 'I've come to tell as many people as possible about God's Kingdom.' ³⁹ So he set off through the region, proclaiming and demonstrating the good news by his teaching and his actions.

⁴⁰ A man suffering from leprosy fell to his knees before Jesus. 'I know you can cure me' he said. 'But will you?' ⁴¹ His heart full of compassion, Jesus stretched out a hand to touch him. 'Of course I will,' he said. 'Be whole again!' ⁴² As Jesus spoke, all trace of disease disappeared.

⁴³⁻⁴⁴ ‘Don’t breathe a word of this to anyone’ Jesus told him. ‘Show the priests what has happened, and do what their law demands. Your healing is a sign for them too.’ ⁴⁵ But of course the man couldn’t stop talking about it to everyone he met! Soon, Jesus had to avoid the towns, but that made no difference; the crowds always found him.

Mark Chapter 2

¹ A few days later, word got out that Jesus was back in Capernaum, ² and so many people crowded into the house where he was staying that they spilled out onto the street as he spoke. ³ Four men brought a paralysed friend on a stretcher ⁴ and, unable to force a way through the crowds, climbed on to the roof, dug through it, and lowered their friend down to Jesus’ feet. ⁵ Seeing their belief and determination, Jesus looked at the paralysed man and said, ‘Child, your sins are wiped away.’

⁶ Some of the religious elite were there and Jesus’ words incensed them. ⁷ ‘Who does he think he is?’ they thought to themselves. ‘What arrogance! Only God can forgive sins. Is that who he’s claiming to be? That’s blasphemy!’

⁸ Jesus sensed this in his spirit and said, ‘I know what you’re thinking:’ ⁹ “Words are cheap: it’s easy to tell someone they’re forgiven because the reality can’t be proved one way or the other. Much easier than telling a paralytic to get up and walk ... ¹⁰ Well, you need to understand that I have power to release people from everything which holds them captive, so watch this.’ He said to the paralysed man, ¹¹ ‘Stand up, roll up your begging mat, and go home’. ¹² As they all watched in disbelief, the man did just that. ‘We’ve never seen anything like this before,’ they said.

¹³ One day, Jesus was walking by the lake, with a crowd hanging on his every word. ¹⁴ Spotting one of the hated local tax collectors, Jesus called out: ‘Follow me.’ The tax collector, Matthew, left his booth and joined Jesus and his friends.

¹⁵ That evening, Jesus and his followers ate at Matthew’s house. The place was full of tax collectors and others the religious elite would have crossed the street to avoid. ¹⁶ ‘What on earth’s he doing with riff-raff like that?’ sniffed the Pharisees. ¹⁷ Overhearing them, Jesus asked, ‘Does a doctor avoid the sick and only visit the healthy? No more will the saviour avoid those who need saving! I’ve little time for those who think themselves above needing any help from God. Give me those who recognise their need any day.’

¹⁸ Going without food was a commonplace religious discipline in those days. Jesus was asked, ‘How come those who follow the Pharisees and John the Baptist abstain from food as part of their spiritual discipline, but you and your followers don’t?’

¹⁹ ‘Because it wouldn’t be a fitting response to what God is doing,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do wedding guests refuse the food laid on at the reception? Of course not – they tuck right in! My guests can’t be expected to behave as if I wasn’t around. ²⁰ I’ll be taken from them soon enough – they can go without food then.’

²¹ ‘If you’ve got a jacket which needs patching, do you patch it with material which doesn’t match? Of course not! It would look dreadful and might even make the original tear worse. ²² And who would put new wine into dirty old bottles? No one! New wine needs brand new bottles to keep it fresh. Your cracked religious systems can’t hold the new life of God’s Kingdom.’

²³ On another Day of Rest, Jesus was walking through a cornfield and his friends pulled off some corn. ²⁴ The Pharisees pounced; ‘Why are your followers breaking the rules?’ ²⁵ ‘How petty you are, and ignorant about the things of God. Don’t you remember the stories of King David?’ ²⁶ When in need, he once took bread from the temple, even though it was only lawful for the priests to eat, to stop his men starving to death. ²⁷ When God gave humankind a weekly day of rest, he meant it to be a blessing, not a burden. It was made for them, not the other way around. ²⁸ One greater than the Day of Rest stands among you.’

Mark Chapter 3

¹ On another occasion in the synagogue there was a man whose hand was deformed. ² The religious elite felt no compassion for him – their only interest was whether Jesus would break their rules by healing him on their Day of Rest. ³ Jesus spoke to the man: ‘Stand up so we can all see you.’ ⁴ Then Jesus asked, ‘What best fits the spirit of our Day of Rest – doing right or doing wrong, saving a life or killing?’ No one uttered a sound – you could have heard a pin drop as people waited to see what he would do next. ⁵ Jesus gazed with anger at the religious elite, dismayed that their hearts could be so cold. ‘Stretch out your hand’, he said to the man. He did so and everyone saw that it was completely normal. ⁶ The Pharisees walked out and began to plot with the supporters of King Herod to have Jesus put to death.

⁷ Jesus and his followers walked down to the lake, followed by a large crowd from the area. ⁸ As word of miracles spread, people came from far and wide ⁹ to the point where Jesus had a small boat ready to escape the crush. ¹⁰ He’d healed so many people that the sick were jostling to touch him. ¹¹ Seeing him, those with evil spirits fell at his feet and shouted, ‘We know you ... Son of God!’ ¹² Jesus commanded them all to be silent.

¹³ Climbing a mountain Jesus selected a team ¹⁴ of twelve men, naming them ‘apostles’ (meaning those who are sent), so that he could train them and send them out to teach, ¹⁵ to have authority to work miracles and to cast out evil spirits. ¹⁶ The twelve were Simon (Jesus later renamed him Peter); ¹⁷ the brothers James and John (he nicknamed them ‘thunder boys’); ¹⁸ Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, another James, Thaddaeus, another Simon (known as ‘the fanatic’); ¹⁹ and Judas, who was eventually to betray him.

²⁰ Jesus was becoming such a draw for the crowds that he and his followers could hardly sit down to eat a meal in peace. ²¹ His family, learning where he was, tried to take control of him. ‘He’s lost his mind!’ they said.

²² Some teachers of the law who’d come from Jerusalem went a step further. ‘He’s possessed by the devil! That explains his power over the dark spirits.’

²³ ‘Well, who’d’ve thought it?’ said Jesus. ‘A man possessed by the devil casting out the devil’s demons! How extraordinary! What general wages war against his own troops?’ ²⁴ A Kingdom at war with itself will fall. ²⁵ A family divided against itself will collapse. ²⁶ And If Satan attacks himself, then his end is in sight.

²⁷ ‘I’ll tell you what’s really going on here. This world is like a house that’s been forcefully occupied by a squatter, a real thug. Everyone’s held hostage by him. If I want to free people from their captivity, I must first tackle the bully; and that’s precisely what I’m doing.’

²⁸ ‘Now listen. This is serious. Be very, very careful before you deliberately mess with the boundaries between God and his Enemy. God’s offer of forgiveness is total and absolute. Whatever you’ve done or said – even against me – can all be forgiven.’ ²⁹ But beware; if you start calling good evil and evil good, you’re on a slippery slope. You can end up with such a hard heart that you won’t even be able to call out to God for forgiveness. It’s not that he won’t be able or willing to forgive – it’s that you won’t be able or willing to ask.’ ³⁰ He said this because the religious elite were claiming ‘He’s possessed by an evil spirit.’

³¹ When Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived, they couldn’t get in to the house and so sent a message to him. ³² Someone in the crowd passed it on. ‘Your mother and brothers are looking for you.’ ³³ ‘Who is my family?’ Jesus replied. Looking at those who hung on his every word, he said, ‘Here they are! Anyone who does God’s will is a member of my family.’

Mark Chapter 4

¹ Once, Jesus was so hemmed in by people on the shore of lake Galilee, that he had to speak to them from a boat out on the water. ² He used stories to explain the Kingdom of God to people. ³ ‘Imagine a farmer, walking across his land, a bag of seed around his neck. As he walks, he picks up the rhythm of sowing – swinging his hand from side to side, scattering the seed everywhere to make sure some of it takes root. ⁴ Some falls on the path beneath his feet, where greedy birds dart in and out, snatching away whatever they can. ⁵ Some falls on rocky ground, where the soil is shallow – it seems to thrive at first, ⁶ but the roots have no depth, and the sun soon kills it off. ⁷ Some falls into thorns which choke the new growth – it doesn’t stand a chance. ⁸ But some seed sinks into rich, deep soil. Up it grows, strong and healthy, producing an abundant crop many times bigger than the seed with which it began. ⁹ Do you hear the message in the story?’

¹⁰ Later, on their own with Jesus, his followers asked him, ‘Why do you speak in riddles?’ ¹¹ ‘It’s a way of testing people,’ he replied. ‘Each story contains a message about God’s Kingdom, like jam in a doughnut. Those who do no more than nibble at the outside never find it. But those who are truly hungry find an explosion of taste just when they least expect it. So, those who are just looking to be entertained simply hear the stories. Those who truly want to find God pick up on the message they tell. ¹² Sadly, the ancient prophet summed up this generation when he said

“They can’t make out the truth in what they see or hear.

Spiritually blind and deaf, they don’t know which way to turn for forgiveness.”

¹³ ‘Take the story of the farmer and the seed. That’s an easy one! Can’t you see?’ ¹⁴ The farmer is God and the seed is the good news I’ve come to bring. ¹⁵ The fate of the seed says something about the different responses people make to my message. Some people have allowed their hearts to harden, and the message never penetrates the surface. God’s Enemy finds it easy to dart in and snatch it away. ¹⁶ Some people make an instant but shallow response. At first, they seem to thrive, ¹⁷ but there’s no depth to their commitment or understanding, and when the heat’s on, they fade away. ¹⁸ Some people hear the good news, ¹⁹ but their lives are overgrown with distractions – worry, greed and the like which choke the message, giving it no chance to ripen and mature into full faith. ²⁰ And then there are those whose hearts are fully ready and receptive. The good news goes deep and grows, strong and healthy, producing an abundant crop of faith and new life.’

²¹ ‘When evening comes and you light a lamp, do you put it under the bed? Of course not! You set it on the bedside table, so that it can do its job. ²² The good news of God’s Kingdom is like a light that shows up what’s in the dark corners of people’s lives. You can’t keep secrets from God. ²³ If you can understand what I’m saying, take note! ²⁴ Listen! God will treat you the way you treat others. ²⁵ Be generous and open-handed and he will give you life. Be tight-fisted, and you’ll lose even what little you have.’

²⁶ ‘The Kingdom of God is like this. Imagine another farmer, sowing seed. ²⁷ Once he’s done, the rest is up to God. The crop grows all by itself; the farmer can neither make it happen nor explain how it happens. ²⁸ The power for growth is in the seed itself, and so it is with the good news of God’s Kingdom. ²⁹ In fact, the farmer has little more to do until harvest time.’

³⁰ ‘How else can I describe the Kingdom? ³¹ Imagine a mustard seed, smallest of all the seeds. ³² Looking at it, you’d never guess that it will grow into the biggest of all the plants in your garden, its branches giving shelter to the birds. But that’s what happens – and so it is with God’s Kingdom. I might not seem much to write home about at the moment, but it will grow big enough to shelter everyone.’ ³³ Every time Jesus spoke to the crowds, he used stories like these; ³⁴ he only explained their meanings to his followers.

³⁵ As evening fell, Jesus said to his followers, ‘Let’s cross to the other side of the lake.’ ³⁶ Leaving the crowd, they set sail, other boats joining them. ³⁷ A fierce storm blew up, the waves threatening to overturn the boat. ³⁸ Jesus was at the back, fast asleep. His followers woke him angrily. ‘Don’t you care if we drown?’ they said. ³⁹ Jesus stood up and rebuked the storm. ‘Hush! Be still!’ he said, and sky and sea were instantly calm. ⁴⁰ ‘Why did you panic?’ Jesus asked his followers. ‘Don’t you trust me yet?’ Unable fully to grasp what they had just seen, his followers whispered to one another, ‘Who on earth are we dealing with here, who can bring nature itself to heel with a single command?’

Mark Chapter 5

¹ They sailed on, landing on the far side of lake Galilee. ² As he stepped ashore, Jesus was confronted with a man possessed by an evil spirit. ³ For years he had lived among the tombs in the hills; ⁴ people had tried restraining him, but he always broke free – not even chains could hold him. ⁵ His screams could be heard echoing around the hills day and night and his body was covered with self-inflicted wounds.

⁶ Seeing Jesus, he ran to him, fell at his feet ⁷ and roared, ‘What do you want with me, son of God? Swear in his name that you won’t torment me!’ ⁸ Jesus had commanded the evil spirit to leave the man. ⁹ ‘What’s your name?’ Jesus demanded. ‘Legion’ the evil spirit replied, ‘for there are many of us’. ¹⁰ Over and over he begged Jesus not to make them leave the area. ¹¹ A large herd of pigs was grazing nearby ¹² and the evil spirits begged Jesus to permit them to enter the pigs. ¹³ Jesus gave them permission and the entire herd, about 2,000 pigs in all, went berserk, rushed over the bank and drowned in the lake.

¹⁴ The herdsman ran for it, and told everyone what had happened, so that a large crowd came running to see for themselves. ¹⁵ When they saw the man – calm, dressed and as sane as anyone else – fear seized them. ¹⁶ Those who’d been there repeated what they’d seen ¹⁷ and the crowd asked Jesus to leave. ¹⁸ As Jesus was getting back into the boat, the healed man asked to go with him. ¹⁹ ‘Go back to your family,’ Jesus said, ‘and tell them all that God has done for you, and the

mercy you've been shown. ²⁰ The man travelled the region, setting the whole area buzzing with what Jesus had done.

²¹ No sooner had Jesus returned to the other side of the lake than the crowds surged around him again. ²² A man named Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue, came and fell at Jesus' feet. ²³ 'My little girl is dying,' he sobbed. 'Please – come and touch her, restore her to life.' ²⁴ Jesus agreed and they set off, the crowd following and jostling around them.

²⁵ In the crowd was a woman who had suffered continual bleeding for twelve long years. ²⁶ Despite going from doctor to doctor, using up all her savings in the process, her condition had worsened, and she was desperate. ²⁷ She'd heard about Jesus and now pushed through the crowd until she could touch his cloak. ²⁸ 'One touch is all it will take,' she told herself. ²⁹ She felt her bleeding stop and knew that her years of suffering were over.

³⁰ Jesus felt it too and knew that power had left him. Turning, he scanned the crowd, and called out, 'Who touched my cloak?' ³¹ 'There are people pressing in from every side,' his followers said. 'It would be easier to ask who didn't touch you!' ³² But Jesus kept looking from face to face, ³³ until the woman, knowing his touch had healed her, came forward. Shaking with fear, she fell at his feet and told him what she'd done. ³⁴ 'Dear child,' Jesus said, 'your faith has made you whole. Go in peace – your suffering is over.'

³⁵ As he was saying this, messengers arrived for Jairus. 'Your daughter has died,' they said. 'There's no point Jesus coming now.' ³⁶ Ignoring them, Jesus looked Jairus straight in the eye. 'Courage' he said. 'Trust me.'

³⁷ Taking only Peter, James and John, ³⁸ Jesus went with Jairus. The house was in uproar, full of mourners weeping and wailing. ³⁹ Marching in, Jesus said, 'Why all this noise? The girl is only sleeping.' ⁴⁰ Knowing full well that she was dead, they laughed in his face. Jesus drove them all out, and took the girl's parents and his three followers into her room. ⁴¹ Taking the child's hand in his, Jesus said softly, 'Little girl – get up.' ⁴² At once she got out of bed and walked round the room. They could hardly comprehend what they were seeing.

⁴³ Jesus charged her parents not to tell anyone what had happened, and told them to give their daughter some food.

Mark Chapter 6

¹ Jesus and his followers went to Nazareth, where he had grown up. ² On the Day of Rest they went to the synagogue and Jesus began to teach, amazing those who present. 'Where does he get such wisdom?' they asked. 'And the power to perform miracles?' ³ 'Wasn't he the town carpenter? Yes, it's Mary's boy; we know his brothers and sisters.' Their couldn't reconcile the boy they'd known with the teacher before them and his presence scandalised them.

⁴ 'A prophet is honoured everywhere except where he's known,' Jesus told them. ⁵ Apart from one or two healings, Jesus found it impossible to do miracles there. ⁶ Their lack of belief dismayed him. So he set off again, preaching from village to village.

⁷ Jesus briefed his team of twelve and sent them out in pairs, giving them authority over evil spirits. ⁸⁻⁹ 'Take only what you need to walk: shoes and a staff, nothing else – no cash, no food, no bag, no change of clothes.' ¹⁰ In each place, stay in the first house to offer you shelter. Don't waste

time looking for somewhere better. ¹¹ If people don't welcome you or your message, don't waste your time – move on. The dust you shake from your feet as you leave will be a stark warning of their mistake.'

¹² So the twelve set off, calling everyone to admit their wrongdoing and turn to God for forgiveness. ¹³ They set people free from evil spirits; they anointed the sick with oil and made them whole.

¹⁴ Even King Herod heard of Jesus. His ears pricked up when he heard people say, 'John the Baptist has come back to life – that explains the miracles!' ¹⁵ 'No,' said others, 'it's one of the ancient prophets, maybe even Elijah ...'

¹⁶ 'It must be John,' Herod concluded. 'The man I beheaded has come back to haunt me!'

¹⁷ This is what had happened: Herod had a brother called Philip, whose wife Herodias caught Herod's eye. When he married her himself, ¹⁸ John had publicly condemned him: 'It's against the law to do this,' he said. ¹⁹ So Herod had thrown John into prison and nursed his grudge against him. He wanted to kill John, but couldn't bring himself to do it. ²⁰ Herod hated and feared John, keeping him alive because he knew John was a holy man. He would visit the cells and listen to him speak, fascinated and yet at a loss to understand what he said.

²¹ Herod's birthday came, and he threw a lavish party for all the high and mighty in the land. ²² The highlight of the evening was a dance by Herodias' daughter, who delighted the assembled guests so much that Herod made a rash promise: ²³ 'Ask me for anything you want, up to half my Kingdom: it's yours!'

²⁴ The girl went to her mother and asked, 'What shall I say?' 'Ask for John the Baptist's head,' Herodias told her. ²⁵ The girl hurried back and told Herod, 'Bring me John the Baptist's head on a plate!' ²⁶ Herod was mortified, but rather than lose face before his guests, ²⁷ he gave the order. John was executed that same hour, ²⁸ and the girl took his severed head to her mother. ²⁹ When John's followers heard the news, they took his body and buried it.

³⁰ Jesus' followers returned from their mission, and reported back all that had happened, ³¹ but the crowds were so big they didn't even have time to eat. 'Let's go somewhere quiet,' Jesus told them. 'You need to rest.' ³² So they slipped away by boat. ³³ But people saw where they were headed and followed along the shoreline. The crowd grew as people from each town they passed joined the chase, ³⁴ so that when Jesus and his friends landed, they found crowds of people waiting for him like a flock of sheep without a shepherd. His heart went out to them and he began to teach them.

³⁵ As the day drew on, his followers became anxious. 'We're miles from anywhere,' they said, 'and it's late. ³⁶ Send the crowd away to eat.' ³⁷ 'You feed them ...' Jesus replied. 'How on earth can we do that?' they exclaimed. 'It would cost a fortune to buy enough food for all these people.' ³⁸ 'Well, what have you got?' asked Jesus. 'Go and find out.' 'Five bread rolls and a couple of sardines,' they muttered when they returned. 'That's the lot.'

³⁹⁻⁴⁰ Jesus told them to sit everyone down in groups of 50 or 100. ⁴¹ Taking the bread and fish, Jesus looked up to heaven and thanked God. Then he began to break it into pieces and handed it to his followers to serve the people. ⁴² The food kept coming until the entire crowd had eaten

their fill. ⁴³ Afterwards, Jesus' followers gathered up twelve large baskets of leftovers. ⁴⁴ The crowd was many thousands' strong.

⁴⁵ Jesus told his followers to take the boat and sail ahead of him to a town called Bethsaida, while he sent the crowd on their way. ⁴⁶ He then climbed a hill to pray.

⁴⁷ Evening fell and ⁴⁸ Jesus looked out to where his followers were struggling to make headway against the wind, pulling on their oars for all they were worth. At about three in the morning he walked across the lake towards them. He made as if to walk straight past them, ⁴⁹ but they saw him and, convinced they were seeing a ghost, ⁵⁰ screamed in terror. 'Don't panic,' Jesus called out. 'It's only me!' ⁵¹ As he climbed in to the boat the storm died away. They couldn't believe what they were seeing – ⁵² even though they'd seen him feed thousands with a few scraps of food that same day, the penny hadn't dropped and their hearts weren't yet soft enough to accept that he had power over nature.

⁵³ Dropping anchor at the town of Genneserat, ⁵⁴ they were recognised. ⁵⁵ As word spread that Jesus had arrived, people stretched the sick to him from across the region. ⁵⁶ Wherever they went, more sick people were brought to the town squares and market places. They begged just to touch the hem of his cloak – and all who touched him became whole again.

Mark Chapter 7

¹ The Pharisees and law teachers from Jerusalem were constantly snooping around Jesus ² and spotted some of his followers eating without washing their hands. ³ External cleanliness was a major feature of the Jewish way of life, strictly enforced by the religious leaders, ⁴ and they had numerous other regulations governing the ceremonial washing of pots and pans.

⁵ 'We can't help but notice that your people disdain the traditions of our ancestors,' they sniffed. 'Just look at their hands – filthy!'

⁶ 'The prophet Isaiah hit the nail on the head when he described your hypocrisy:

*"Your faith is barely skin deep;
no amount of fine words can disguise your cold hearts.*

⁷ *Your worship doesn't move me,
because you've replaced my life-giving word
with heavy rules of your own devising."*

⁸⁻⁹ 'You've abandoned God's commands in favour of your own traditions,' Jesus continued. ¹⁰ 'You claim to revere Moses who demanded honour for parents and specified severe penalties for anyone abusing that sacred duty; ¹¹ yet here you are, busily finding ways to undermine that teaching. You allow yourselves to sidestep responsibility for your parents by claiming that the money they need in their old age is reserved for God instead. ¹² If people do that, you dismiss any duty they have to the older generation. ¹³ And that's just one example of your contempt for God and his word.'

¹⁴ Jesus called the crowd closer and said, 'Listen to me, all of you – listen and understand. ¹⁵ Don't fall for the claim that living God's way is a matter of external cleanliness. God sees beneath

appearances to all the things that really corrupt you. It's not what goes in to your mouth that corrupts you, but what comes out.'

¹⁷ Later, his followers asked him what he'd meant. ¹⁸ 'Can't you see?' Jesus replied. 'How can what you eat make you morally corrupt? ¹⁹ Food doesn't go to the heart but simply passes through the body. ²⁰ Spiritual and moral cleanliness is about your heart. ²¹ That's the origin of everything that pollutes you morally – dark thoughts, immorality, thieving, killing, adultery, ²² greed, malice, deceit, envy, slander, and arrogance. ²³ All these come from inside you and make you unclean. Washing your hands or crockery is neither here nor there.'

²⁴ Moving on, Jesus went to the region of Tyre and entered a house, hoping to keep his arrival quiet; but word soon spread that he was there. ²⁵ Indeed, one woman came straight to the house and begged Jesus to drive an evil spirit from her little girl. ²⁶ She wasn't Jewish, but Syrian. ²⁷ Testing her faith, Jesus said, 'I need to feed the children of Israel first rather than throwing their food to dogs.' ²⁸ 'Of course, Master,' she shot back, 'but the dogs are happy enough with any scraps that fall from the table.' ²⁹ Her response was all Jesus needed. 'Go back to your daughter,' he said. 'You will find her well again.' ³⁰ The woman found her daughter sleeping peacefully, the evil spirit gone.

³¹ Jesus moved on again, to Galilee and a region known as 'the ten towns'. ³² A man who couldn't hear and barely speak was brought to him, his friends begging Jesus to touch him. ³³ Taking the man away from the crowd, he touched the man's ears, spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Looking up to heaven Jesus sighed deeply, and said, 'Open!' ³⁵ As he spoke the man found he could both hear and speak clearly. ³⁶ Jesus ordered the people not to tell a soul, but the more he insisted, the more they blurted out the news. ³⁷ How could they contain what they had seen and heard? 'Is there anything this man can't do?' people wondered. 'He can even restore hearing and speech.'

Mark Chapter 8

¹ A huge crowd massed, staying around Jesus for three whole days without food. Jesus told his followers, ² 'I'm concerned about all these people and the time they've gone without food. ³ Some are a long way from home. If they set off without food, some might not make it.' ⁴ His followers replied, 'But there's no bread to feed them out here.' ⁵ 'How much bread do you have?' Jesus asked them. 'Seven rolls,' they answered. ⁶ Telling the crowd to sit down, Jesus thanked God for the bread, broke it and told his followers to share it among the crowd. ⁷ They found a few fish too which Jesus also blessed and shared. ⁸ Several thousand people ate their fill, and Jesus' followers filled seven baskets with leftovers. ⁹ Having sent the crowd back to their homes, ¹⁰ Jesus and his followers left by boat.

¹¹ Some Pharisees came to test Jesus, asking him to perform a 'sign from heaven.' ¹² 'Why do you ask for such a thing?' Jesus sighed. 'Make no mistake, you're not getting one.' ¹³ Jesus got back into the boat with his followers and crossed the lake once more.

¹⁴ They'd only brought one loaf with them, ¹⁵ so when Jesus suddenly said, 'Be careful to avoid the yeast of the Pharisees and of King Herod,' ¹⁶ they talked among themselves, concluding, 'He's telling us off for not bringing any bread.'

¹⁷ Reading their thoughts, Jesus asked, 'What's all this about bread? Do you still not get it? Your hearts aren't exactly dough-soft yet are they? ¹⁸ Can't you see or hear what's going on? Or have

you just forgotten what you've seen and heard? ¹⁹ When I fed five thousand with five loaves, how much was left over?' 'Twelve basketfuls,' they replied. ²⁰ 'And when I fed four thousand with seven loaves?' Jesus pressed. 'Seven,' they told him. ²¹ Jesus said, 'What, and you still don't get it?'

²² Jesus and his followers arrived in Bethsaida, where some people pleaded with Jesus to heal a blind friend. ²³ Leading him outside the village, Jesus spat on the man's eyes and placed his hands on him. 'What do you see now?' Jesus asked. ²⁴ The man peered about. 'I can see people, but they're all blurred.' ²⁵ Jesus touched his eyes again; and this time his sight was fully restored. ²⁶ Jesus told him to go straight home and not back to the village.

²⁷ Jesus and his followers set off once again and during the journey Jesus asked them, 'What do you hear people saying about me? Who do they think I am?' ²⁸ 'All sorts of things,' they replied. 'Some say you're one of the ancient prophets come back to life; others that you're John the Baptist.' ²⁹ 'And what about you?' asked Jesus. 'It's the key question. Who do you think I am?' Peter answered for them all. 'You are the Saviour, the Chosen One, the Saviour of the world.' ³⁰ Jesus warned them not to breathe a word to anyone.

³¹ Jesus then began to tell his followers that he would be rejected by the religious authorities, that he would be killed and, after three days, rise from the dead. ³² He didn't mince his words and Peter pulled him aside and began to contradict him. ³³ Looking at his followers, Jesus said, 'Stop right there, Peter. That's the Enemy speaking through you, trying to turn me aside from the path my Father has given me. Your mind is full of human thoughts rather than those which come from God.'

³⁴ Calling the crowds nearer, Jesus said, 'Listen. If anyone wants to be my follower, this is the deal. I'm going to my death, and you must be willing to pay the same price. You must be willing to follow me every step of the way, carrying your own cross if need be. ³⁵ If you spend your life trying to save your skin, you'll find everything you've hoped to gain will disappear like morning mist. But if you're willing to gamble it all on me and the good news I proclaim, then you'll find a life rich beyond your wildest dreams. ³⁶ Don't sell your soul for a good time now. Nothing in the world is worth the risk of losing out on eternal life. ³⁷ What's more valuable than your soul? Would you seriously trade in life with God forever for the few years of this life? ³⁸ I give you fair warning. If you won't own me and my words publicly in this life, how can I count you among my followers when I come back in glory with all God's angels?

Mark Chapter 9

¹ I tell you straight – many of you here will still be alive when you see God's Kingdom arrive in power.'

² A week later, Jesus took Peter, James & John up a mountain alone, where his true nature was revealed to them. ³ As they watched, his clothes began to shimmer with light, dazzling them with a brightness sharper than any they'd seen. ⁴ They became aware of two figures talking with Jesus and knew they were Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the great prophet.

⁵⁻⁶ So scared he didn't know what else to say, Peter blurted out the first thing that came into his mind. 'Why don't I knock up three shelters, one for each of you?' ⁷ But a cloud formed and enclosed them, and they heard a voice, saying, 'This is my son, the apple of my eye. Pay attention to what he teaches you.' ⁸ The next thing they knew, they were alone again with Jesus.

⁹ On their way back down the mountain, Jesus warned them not to discuss what had happened until they had seen him rise from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept it to themselves, and debated what on earth he meant by 'rising from the dead.'

¹¹ They asked him, 'What do our religious teachers mean when they talk of Elijah appearing before the Saviour comes?' ¹² 'They're right,' Jesus replied. 'Elijah returns before everything is restored. Why then do the holy writings talk about the Saviour suffering and being rejected?' ¹³ But as far as Elijah is concerned, he's already come – and they did away with him, just as it was prophesied.'

¹⁴ They found the rest of their team embroiled in an argument with some teachers of the law, surrounded by a large crowd. ¹⁵ Seeing Jesus, the people rushed towards him, ¹⁶ and he asked them, 'What's all the fuss about?' ¹⁷ 'Teacher!' a man called out, 'I brought my son, hoping you would drive out the evil spirit which has robbed him of the ability to speak. ¹⁸ Whenever it takes hold of him it slams him to the ground ... he foams at the mouth and becomes stiff as a board. I asked your followers to deal with it, but they couldn't.'

¹⁹ 'Give me strength,' Jesus groaned. 'How long must I endure your lack of faith? Bring the boy here.' ²⁰ When the evil spirit saw Jesus, it convulsed the boy and threw him to the ground, where he rolled around, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ 'How long has this been going on?' Jesus asked. 'Since he was a child,' answered the father. ²² 'The spirit throws him into fire and water, seeking to destroy him. Please!' he cried, 'if you can do anything for him, have mercy upon us and do it!'

²³ 'If?' asked Jesus. 'Faith makes everything possible.' ²⁴ 'I believe,' the father cried out, 'but I need help to conquer my doubts.' ²⁵ Seeing the crowd swelling with those attracted by the commotion, Jesus spoke to the spirit: 'You're robbed this child of hearing and speech for the last time. Be gone! And do not come back.' ²⁶ With a shriek and one last violent convulsion, the spirit left. The boy was so still the crowd thought he was dead. ²⁷ But Jesus pulled him to his feet and reunited him with his father.

²⁸ Once indoors and alone again, his followers asked Jesus, 'What went wrong when we tried to drive the spirit out?' ²⁹ 'You need to rely on God's power, not on your own strength,' Jesus told them. 'Pray for that power.'

³⁰ They left that place and moved on through Galilee. Jesus tried to keep their location hidden ³¹ because he had vital truth to teach his followers. 'I'm going to be betrayed and those who take me will kill me. But after three days I will rise again.' ³² But their minds simply couldn't accept it, and they were too scared to ask him to explain.

³³ Arriving in Capernaum, Jesus asked his followers, 'What was that argument about on the journey?' ³⁴ None of them wanted to admit that they'd been discussing which one of them was the greatest. ³⁵ So Jesus gathered the twelve around him and said, 'So you want to be top dog in God's Kingdom, do you? Well let me explain how that works. If you want to be the greatest, you must learn to serve everyone else.' ³⁶ Jesus took a child and stood him before them. Taking the child in his arms, Jesus said, ³⁷ 'Welcome one of these little ones and you welcome me; and more than that, you welcome the God who sent me.'

³⁸ 'Teacher,' said John. 'We saw someone driving out evil spirits in your name. He wasn't one of us, so we stopped him.' ³⁹ 'Don't do that', said Jesus. 'If they work miracles in my name, they can't be

speaking against me. ⁴⁰ If they're not working against us they're working with us. ⁴¹ I tell you straight – if all someone does is give you water in my name because you're one of my people, they will be rewarded.'

⁴² 'It would be better to be set in concrete and thrown into the sea rather than cause someone who trusts in me to doubt and lose their way. ⁴³⁻⁴⁵ If your hand or foot threatens your hold on eternal life, cut it off! ⁴⁷ If your eye leads you away from me, pluck it out! Hold fast to eternal life, whatever the cost. Limp or crawl or grope your way blindly into God's Kingdom if you must – just make sure you're in! ⁴⁸ The alternative is to be left out in the cold, separated from God forever. ⁴⁹ Everyone will be tested by God

⁵⁰ 'Salt is wonderful, unless it loses its taste. Can anyone restore taste to stale salt? Be salty then, and live in peace with one another.'

Mark Chapter 10

¹ Jesus left and crossed the River Jordan. As usual, crowds gathered and Jesus taught them. ² Some Pharisees posed a question, hoping to catch him out. 'What's your view on divorce?' they asked. 'Can a man get rid of his wife?' ³ 'What did Moses say?' asked Jesus. ⁴ 'Moses said a man could get rid of his wife just by filing the divorce papers,' they replied.

⁵ 'Moses wrote that for men with hard hearts,' Jesus told them. ⁶ 'Divorce was never part of God's original plan for man and woman. ⁷ From the dawn of time, God has called men and women to live together in marriage. ⁸ In the union of marriage, a man and a woman become one. ⁹ Those God has paired cannot be separated by human choice.'

¹⁰ Later, his followers asked Jesus to say more about this. ¹¹⁻¹² 'It's the same for men and women,' Jesus told them. 'If you divorce your husband or wife and marry someone else, that's adultery.'

¹³ People were always bringing their children to Jesus for his blessing, and his followers tried to stop them. ¹⁴ Jesus was incensed. 'Don't ever try to stop these children coming to me. Their childlike faith and trust are the key to entering God's Kingdom. ¹⁵ I tell you straight – unless you are willing to trust as simply and deeply as they do, you'll miss it every time.' ¹⁶ With that, he swept the children up in his arms and blessed them.

¹⁷ Jesus was just leaving when a man ran up and fell to his knees before him. 'It's obvious you're a good teacher,' he said. 'What can I do to guarantee eternal life?' ¹⁸ 'Why call me "good",' Jesus asked him, 'when only God himself deserves that?'

¹⁹ 'You know the ten commandments, don't you?' asked Jesus. ²⁰ 'I've never broken one in my life,' the man replied proudly. ²¹ Looking into the young man's eyes, Jesus' heart went out to him. 'There's just one thing missing,' Jesus said. 'Go home, sell up, give all your money to the poor, and follow me. You won't regret it – there's more treasure in heaven than you could ever stockpile on earth.'

²² The man's face fell; he turned and walked away. He was very rich. ²³ Jesus said to his followers, 'How hard it is for anyone wedded to wealth to enter the Kingdom of God.' ²⁴ Seeing their amazement, Jesus went on, 'I'm serious. Entering God's Kingdom isn't easy. ²⁵ A camel's got more

chance of squeezing through the eye of a needle than anyone whose first love is the things of earth has of entering the Kingdom.'

²⁶ His followers were staggered. They'd always been taught that wealth was a sign of God's special favour. 'If what he says is true,' they said to each other, 'how can anyone hope to be saved?'

²⁷ 'You're right about one thing,' said Jesus. 'If entering God's Kingdom was something you had to achieve for yourself, no one could ever be saved. Praise God that he is the one who both invites you in, and then makes it possible for you to enter.'

²⁸ 'We've given up everything for you!' Peter called out. ²⁹ 'And I promise you this,' replied Jesus. 'Whatever you leave behind to follow me – home, family, wealth – ³⁰ it will be more than made up to you even in this life. You'll face persecution too, it's true, but in the next life, you'll live with God forever. ³¹

But remember that those who put themselves first now will be at the back of the queue then; and those who gladly accept a lowly place here will be the guests of honour in the Kingdom of God.'

³² Jesus was leading them towards Jerusalem, and those who travelled with him felt a mixture of anticipation and fear. Once more, he took the twelve aside and told them what to expect. ³³ 'In Jerusalem, I will be betrayed and taken by the religious rulers who will condemn me and hand me over to the Romans. ³⁴ They'll mock and spit at me, flog me and execute me. Three days later I will rise from the dead.'

³⁵ James and John came up to Jesus. 'We've got a favour to ask,' they said, 'and we want you to say "Yes".' ³⁶ 'What did you have in mind?' asked Jesus. ³⁷ 'Well,' they said, 'in the coming Kingdom, you'll have the seat of honour, of course. So we'd like to be seated either side of you.'

³⁸ 'You've no idea what you're asking,' replied Jesus. 'Hand on heart, can you truly claim you are ready to follow the path I am about to walk?' ³⁹ 'Oh yes,' they answered. Jesus said, 'Even though you have no idea yet what this means, I am afraid that you will, very soon. ⁴⁰ However, I'm not responsible for the seating plan in God's Kingdom. The places you've requested are already reserved.'

⁴¹ When the others learnt what James and John had done, they were furious. ⁴² Jesus said, 'Stop right there. No more looking at everything through this world's eyes, seeing leadership as an excuse to lord it over others and feather your own nests. ⁴³ That's not the way of the Kingdom. Want to be great in the Kingdom? Serve others. ⁴⁴ Want to be first? Be a slave to everyone. ⁴⁵ Look at me. I didn't come looking for servants; I came to serve – and to buy back the lost at the price of my own life.'

⁴⁶ As they were leaving the city of Jericho, a blind man called Bartimaeus was begging by the side of the road. ⁴⁷ Hearing Jesus was passing by, he began to shout out, 'Jesus, King David's son, take pity on me.' ⁴⁸ People tried to hush him up, but he only yelled louder. ⁴⁹ Jesus stopped and called him over. 'Hurry up!' they told him. 'He's waiting for you ...' ⁵⁰ Dropping his beggar's cloak, he jumped up and made his way to Jesus.

⁵¹ 'What do you want?' asked Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'I want my sight back.' ⁵² 'OK, it's done,' said Jesus. 'Your faith has made you whole.' Bartimaeus looked up, and finding his sight restored, followed Jesus away from the city.

Mark Chapter 11

¹ Their approach to Jerusalem brought Jesus and his followers to two small villages just outside the city, near the Mount of Olives. ² Jesus sent two of his followers into one, saying, 'As you enter, you'll see an unbroken colt – untie it and bring it to me. ³ If you're challenged, say "the Lord needs it for a short while – it'll be back soon."' "

⁴ They found it just as Jesus had said, and as they were untying it ⁵ some bystanders called out, 'Hey! What are you doing?' ⁶ They said what Jesus had told them and the people let them go.

⁷ Bringing the colt to Jesus, they fashioned a rough saddle from their cloaks, and so Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. ⁸ There was a carnival atmosphere among his followers – people threw cloaks and palm branches on the road in front of him. ⁹ The sound of cheering rose above the clamour, as people grew ever more excited about what would happen when Jesus entered Jerusalem. 'Save us!' they shouted. 'Praise the great king! ¹⁰ Bring back the glory days of King David. Save us!'

¹¹ The day was getting late, so Jesus didn't stay in the city for long. He went into the temple and took careful note of what he saw, and then left to spend the night in the village of Bethany.

¹² The next morning, on their way back into Jerusalem, Jesus was hungry. ¹³ Seeing a fig tree he went over to it but found nothing but leaves; it was too early in the year for fruit. ¹⁴ 'You'll never produce fruit again,' Jesus said, as his followers listened.

¹⁵ Inside the city, Jesus went into the temple. Far from the peace and tranquillity that might be expected, the scene was pandemonium. The outer court was full of traders making easy money from those who had come to worship. Jesus began to throw them out, overturning their tables and scattering their coins. ¹⁶ He blocked those trying to bring in things to sell, ¹⁷ shouting as did so, 'Our holy writings say that this temple is to be a place of prayer for all the peoples of earth – but you've made it a den of thieves!'

¹⁸ This hardened the resolve of the chief priests and law teachers to find a way to dispose of Jesus permanently. They could feel their power waning day by day as the crowds hung on every word he spoke. ¹⁹ That evening, Jesus and his followers went back to Bethany.

²⁰ The next morning, the fig tree had withered away. ²¹ When Peter pointed it out, ²² Jesus said, 'Listen. Trust in God and the impossible becomes possible. ²³ I tell you straight, only believe in God's power and you can move mountains. ²⁴ If you ask God for something, believe that he will answer, don't doubt, and what you ask will be given you. ²⁵ When you pray, be sure to let go of anything you hold against anybody else. Forgive everyone everything so that your heavenly Father can forgive you.'

²⁷ Later that day in the temple courts, Jesus was confronted by the chief priests, law teachers and civic leaders. ²⁸ 'Who gave you the right to act and speak like this?' they demanded. ²⁹ 'I'll answer your question,' Jesus replied, 'if you can answer one of mine. ³⁰ You remember John the Baptist? Of course you do. Now, was his ministry from God or his own invention?' ³¹ This foxed them. 'If we say John's ministry was truly from God,' they said to one another, 'he'll ask why we didn't accept it. ³² But if we say it was human invention, the crowds might turn on us – they revere John as a

prophet. ³³ Turning back to Jesus, all they could say was ‘We don’t know.’ ‘Well,’ said Jesus, ‘if you can’t work that out, there’s not much point discussing where my authority comes from, is there?’

Mark Chapter 12

¹ Jesus said, ‘Imagine a man who plants a vineyard. He spares neither expense nor effort to get it just the way he wants it and rents it out to local farmers. ² Harvest time comes, and the owner sends his servant to collect his share. ³ But the tenants beat him up and kick him out with nothing. ⁴ Another servant goes, but is treated worse than the first. ⁵ The third one is killed by the tenants. Servant after servant tries to collect the owner’s due – some are beaten, others killed.

⁶ ‘Finally, the owner sends his only son, whom he loves. “Surely,” he thinks, “they will treat him properly, even if only out of shame. ⁷ But the tenants see their main chance. “Without a son, there’ll be nobody to inherit – we can keep it all!” ⁸ So they kill the son, and dump his body outside the vineyard.

⁹ ‘What do you think the owner of the vineyard’s going to do? He’s going to mete out justice to those wicked tenants. They’ll pay with their lives, and then the owner will rent his vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Don’t you remember what one of the psalms says?

*The cornerstone for the whole building
has been carefully chosen by the architect,
but the builders refuse to use it!*

¹¹ *It’s heart-rending to watch it happen ...’*

¹² Knowing Jesus was speaking about their attitude towards him, the chief priests, law teachers and civic leaders determined to arrest him. But couldn’t think of a way to do so without inflaming the crowds. So they stalked off.

¹³ But they were soon back. This time, some Pharisees and some of Herod’s supporters got together and tried to flatter Jesus into a trap. ¹⁴ ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we know you always speak the truth. We admire the way you don’t mind what people think, no matter how important they might be. You’d still say what you believe to be true even if the greatest person on earth were offended by it. So, we have a question for you. ¹⁵ Should loyal Jews pay taxes to the Romans or not?’

[This was a real bone of contention in contemporary Jewish circles. Their country was occupied by the hated Romans, who ruled the known world, and Roman taxes were an ever-present reminder of that fact.]

But Jesus spotted the trap and stepped round it. ‘Toss me a coin ... ¹⁶ whose image and name does it bear?’ ‘The Emperor’s,’ they replied. ¹⁷ ‘There’s your answer, then,’ said Jesus. ‘If it belongs to Caesar, give it to him. And whatever you owe God, give it to him.’ It was a brilliant reply, and left his opponents speechless.

¹⁸ Another religious group, the Sadducees who did not believe in life after death weighed in. ¹⁹ ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘the law of Moses says that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a widow without children, he must marry his dead brother’s widow and have children with her, in order to keep the brother’s name alive. ²⁰⁻²¹ So what if seven brothers each died in turn, leaving one woman a

childless widow seven times over? ²² Then she dies. ²³ If there really is such a thing as ‘resurrection,’ which of the seven will be her husband then?’

²⁴ ‘You’re barking up the wrong tree,’ Jesus replied, ‘because you’re ignorant of God’s word and his miraculous power. ²⁵ In the life to come, marriage will cease to exist. ²⁶ And how can you claim not to believe in life after death when our holy writings proclaim it as fact? Don’t you remember that God introduced himself to Moses from the burning bush as “ ... the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?” ²⁷ Unless there’s life after death, that makes him God of the dead rather than the living. You’re way off beam.’

²⁸ One of the law teachers, impressed by the way Jesus was answering these questions, asked him, ‘Which of God’s commandments do you think is most important?’ ²⁹ ‘Number one,’ replied Jesus, ‘is this: there is only one God and ³⁰ you are to love him with every part of your being – heart, soul, mind and strength. Second, love others as much as you love yourself. ³¹ Devote yourself to these two principles for living, for they encompass the life of God’s Kingdom.’

³²⁻³³ ‘I couldn’t agree more,’ said the man. ‘The summary you’ve just given is far more important than any religious ritual.’ ³⁴ Impressed by the man’s reply, Jesus told him, ‘You’re close to God’s Kingdom.’ After that, no one had the courage to challenge Jesus or question him further.

³⁵ Jesus now had the floor to himself and continued to teach the crowds who gathered in the temple courts. ‘Why do the teachers of the law say the Saviour is the son of King David? ³⁶⁻³⁷ David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, called him “Lord” – so where do they get the notion of the Saviour being David’s son?’ The people lapped it up!

³⁸ ‘What do you really see when you look at your so-called religious leaders?’ he continued. ‘People who love their status and all the plaudits it brings them. How they love to parade in their fine clothes, breathing in people’s admiration, expecting people to bow and scrape to them? ³⁹ They make sure they’re always seen in the right places – and expect the best seats! ⁴⁰ But it’s all a charade. Behind the scenes, their lives are crooked and hypocritical. One moment, they’ll deprive a widow of her home, thinking they can make up for it the next with one of their flowery prayers which goes on and on. They may think themselves fine and dandy; they may even get away with it here on earth. But when they come face to face with God, there’ll be a heavy reckoning.’

⁴¹ Jesus sat for a while, watching people coming and going in the temple courts, putting money in the collection box. Rich people would carelessly toss in a wad of notes, keen for people to notice and admire them. ⁴² But Jesus spotted an old widow, poor as a church mouse, who quietly slipped a couple of coins into the box. ⁴³ ‘Did you see that?’ Jesus asked his followers. ‘She’s made the biggest single contribution of the day. ⁴⁴ All the others can afford to give big and still have stacks of money left. Their giving has hardly cost them anything. But this woman has given God all she had.’

Mark Chapter 13

¹ Later, as they were leaving the temple, one of his followers began to rave about its beauty. ‘What a glorious building – just look at the size of those stones!’ ² ‘Take a good long look,’ said Jesus. ‘The day will come when this awesome temple will be reduced to a pile of rubble.’

³ They climbed the Mount of Olives and sat looking back across at Temple Mount. Peter, James, John and Andrew took Jesus aside. ⁴ ‘When’s all this going to happen?’ they asked. ‘Will we have any warning?’

⁵ ‘Make sure no one leads you astray,’ Jesus told them. ⁶ ‘Many imposters will come, claiming to be me. They’ll fool a lot of people. ⁷⁻⁸ You’ll hear talk of war – and wars will come, make no mistake. Nations will clash, Kingdoms will rise and fall, natural disasters will shake the Earth time and time again. But don’t let any of this shake you. All these things are inevitable, but they don’t mean the End is nigh. They’re more like a woman’s first contractions as she goes into labour.’

⁹ ‘Stay alert. This world won’t be an easy place for those who follow me. The authorities will try to stamp out your faith. They’ll parade you before governors and kings. ¹⁰ Although grim for you, the good news about me will travel the world.’ ¹¹ Don’t worry about what you’ll say – when the time comes, the Spirit of God himself will give you the words you need.

¹² ‘People will betray members of their own family. ¹³ You’ll be hated just because you follow me. But if you stand firm through it all, I promise that you’ll be safe in the end.’

¹⁴ ‘Watch out for an act of desecration so abominable it will be unmistakable to those who know what to look for. When that happens, run for the hills. ¹⁵⁻¹⁶ You won’t have a moment to lose. Don’t hesitate; don’t go back for anything, just get out of there. ¹⁷ It’ll be tough on expectant mums and those with young families. ¹⁸ Pray it doesn’t happen in winter ¹⁹ because the world will never have experienced such trauma – and never will again. ²⁰ Thank God that time will be brief or no one could hope to survive. God will keep it short for you, his chosen ones. ²¹ Don’t drop your guard while all this is happening: if anyone says, ‘Look! The Saviour has returned,’ don’t believe it for a moment. ²² Fake saviours and prophets will be ten a penny. They’ll dazzle people with miracles, anything to fool my chosen ones. ²³ Don’t listen. I’m warning you now so that you don’t get caught out.’

²⁴ ‘The prophet Isaiah tells us that this will be followed by astonishing signs in the skies:

*The sun and the moon will cease to shine;
²⁵ stars will fall and the cosmos itself will be shaken.*

²⁶ These things will herald my return, and there’ll be no mistaking that for anything else! I’ll be riding the clouds, ²⁷ and God’s angels will gather all my followers from the four corners of the earth. ²⁸ You know how to read the seasons – you see a tree in blossom and know that summer is just around the corner. ²⁹ In the same way, these are the signs of my return. ³⁰ I tell you straight, the human race won’t end until all this happens. ³¹ The cosmos will end one day, but my words stand for ever.’

³² ‘Before you ask, not even I know the exact timing of all this, only God himself. ³³ So keep your eye on the ball. ³⁴ Imagine a man going on a business trip. He leaves people in charge, each with their own responsibility. One is told to watch for the owner’s return. ³⁵ Imagine that’s your job. Keep your eyes open, because the owner of this world could return at any time of day or night. ³⁶ How embarrassing if he should find you fast asleep. ³⁷ My message is simple – “Stay awake!”’

Mark Chapter 14

¹ The Feast of Passover, one of the main celebrations in the Jewish religious calendar was just days away, and the chief priests and law teachers were still racking their brains for a way to have Jesus arrested and killed. ² ‘We’ll wait for the Feast to end,’ they said, ‘or there’ll be a riot.’

³ One evening Jesus was invited to dinner by a man named Simon, who lived in Bethany. During the meal, a woman came in with an alabaster jar. She broke it and poured perfume worth a small fortune over Jesus’ head. ⁴ Some of the other guests were incensed and began to mutter under their breath, ‘What a shocking waste! ⁵ Think of all the good she could have done with that sort of money.’ And they poured abuse on her.

⁶ ‘Let her be,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you abusing her like this? What she’s done speaks volumes for her character. ⁷ You’ve got the rest of your lives to spend helping the poor. But you won’t have me around much longer. ⁸ She has used what she had to anoint my body ready for burial. ⁹ Her actions here tonight will become part of the good news everywhere it’s told. She’ll never be forgotten.’

¹⁰ For Judas, one of Jesus’ closest followers, this was the final straw. He went to the chief priests and agreed to betray Jesus, ¹¹ much to their delight. With a promise of money ringing in his ears, Judas slipped back in among Jesus’ followers and waited his chance.

¹² The first day of the Feast arrived, and Jesus’ followers asked, ‘Where are we going to eat our Passover meal?’

¹³ Jesus chose two of his followers. ‘Go into Jerusalem. Follow a man carrying a jug of water and see what house he enters. ¹⁴ Tell the owner, “The Teacher asks where he can eat the Passover.” ¹⁵ He’ll take you to a big room upstairs, with everything we need. Get things ready for us there.’

¹⁶ Everything happened just as Jesus had said, so the two began to make preparations. ¹⁷ Jesus and his core team of twelve arrived that evening.

¹⁸ As they reclined at the table, Jesus dropped a bombshell. ‘One of you is going to betray me.’ ¹⁹ Dismayed, they each began to say, ‘Surely you can’t mean me?’ ²⁰ ‘One of you twelve, sharing this meal with me, will betray me,’ Jesus repeated. ²¹ ‘I must follow the path laid out for me, but the one who betrays me is like a ship heading for the rocks. He’ll wish he’d never been born.’

²² Later in the meal Jesus took some bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his followers. ‘Eat,’ he said, ‘This is my body.’ ²³ He then blessed the cup of wine, and each of them drank from it. ²⁴ ‘My blood will be poured out to bring everyone who believes in me home to God. ²⁵ The next wine I taste will be the new wine of God’s Kingdom.’

²⁶ After singing God’s praises together, they went out into the night, heading for the Mount of Olives.

²⁷ ‘None of you will stand by me,’ Jesus told them. ‘The prophets are quite clear that

The shepherd will be killed and the sheep will scatter

²⁸ ‘But when I’m raised from the dead, I’ll wait for you in Galilee.’ ²⁹ ‘I’ll never desert you,’ Peter protested, ‘even if the rest do.’ ³⁰ ‘On the contrary,’ said Jesus, by the time the cock crows at dawn

tomorrow, you'll have denied me three times.' ³¹ But Peter insisted, 'Even if it costs me my life, I'll never deny you! They all made similar promises.

³² Entering a garden called Gethsemane, Jesus told his followers to wait while he prayed. ³³ Taking Peter, James and John deeper into the garden, Jesus, beside himself with grief, said, ³⁴ 'I'm almost overwhelmed by what is to come. I feel ready to die right here and now. Stay here and keep your eyes open.' ³⁵ He walked forward alone, collapsed to the ground, and cried out, ³⁶ 'Father, you can do anything. Please don't put me through this. But you know I'll always put your will ahead of my own needs.'

³⁷ Returning to his three followers, he found them asleep. 'Peter,' he said, 'couldn't you even manage one hour?' ³⁸ If you're going to avoid the temptations surrounding you, you'll need to keep awake – and pray. I know your hearts are in the right place, but it takes true grit to follow through on your good intentions.' ³⁹ Jesus went off to ask his Father a second time to release him. ⁴⁰ They just couldn't keep their eyes open, so Jesus again found them asleep. They were too embarrassed to say anything. ⁴¹ The third time, Jesus said, 'Still asleep? Still got your feet up? No more time for that. ⁴² Up you get, it's time to go. Look, here's my betrayer.'

⁴³ And there was Judas with an armed mob sent by the chief priests, law teachers and civic leaders. ⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵ He walked straight up to Jesus and kissed him. This was the sign the mob was waiting for, ⁴⁶ and they seized Jesus. ⁴⁷ One of his followers drew a sword and struck out, catching the chief priest's slave and cutting off his ear.

⁴⁸ 'Am I a revolutionary?' asked Jesus, 'Why come here armed to the teeth?' ⁴⁹ Why not simply grab me in the temple? I've hardly been hiding. I'll tell you why. No matter how much you think you're in control here, you're simply playing your roles in the drama already written in scripture.' ⁵⁰ And Jesus' followers melted away into the shadows. ⁵¹ One was grabbed by the mob, but managed to wriggle free of his robe ⁵² and fled naked into the night.

⁵³ They took Jesus to the home of the high priest where the religious and civic leaders gathered. ⁵⁴ Peter kept a safe distance and sneaked into the courtyard of the house, where he joined the guards around their fire.

⁵⁵ The Jewish Court – the Sanhedrin – had been hastily convened but could produce no evidence to justify having Jesus executed; ⁵⁶ and those who were willing to trot out trumped up charges against him contradicted each other. ⁵⁷ Others claimed, ⁵⁸ 'He said "I'll tear this temple down and build another in three days!"' ⁵⁹ But their statements didn't match either. The whole thing was a sham.

⁶⁰ The high priest then challenged Jesus directly. 'You've heard the charges against you. What do you have to say in your defence?' ⁶¹ But Jesus said nothing. The high priest pressed him. 'Are you the Saviour, the son of God?' ⁶² 'Yes,' replied Jesus, 'I am. You'll know me when I return, at the right hand of God, riding the clouds of heaven.' ⁶³ Incensed, the high priest tore his robes. 'What further proof do we need of this man's guilt?' he asked his fellow leaders. ⁶⁴ 'He's condemned himself with his blasphemy.' The Court agreed he must die ⁶⁵ and some spat on him as he was blindfolded and beaten. 'Come on, *son of God*,' they mocked, 'surely a prophet would know who's hitting him?' Then the guards took him away and beat him again.

⁶⁶ Down in the courtyard, one of the serving girls was staring at Peter. ⁶⁷ 'Hey you!' she called. 'You were with that Jesus.' ⁶⁸ 'I haven't a clue what you're taking about,' Peter said, and moved away. ⁶⁹ But the girl said to those standing around, 'That man is definitely one of them.' ⁷⁰ Again, Peter denied it. Then someone in the crowd called out, 'You must be one of them – you're from Galilee!' ⁷¹ 'Damn me if I'm lying,' Peter swore, 'I don't even know the man!' ⁷² As he spoke, a rooster crowed ... and he remembered what Jesus had said. And Peter broke down, weeping uncontrollably.

Mark Chapter 15

¹ At dawn the chief priests, law teachers, civic leaders and whole the Court made its decision. They tied Jesus up and took him to the Roman Governor of their region, a man called Pilate. ² 'So you claim to be king of the Jews, is that right?' he asked. 'Yes,' Jesus replied. ³ The chief priests reeled off all the trumped up charges against him, ⁴ so Pilate asked him, 'How do you plead? That's quite a list of offences!' ⁵ But Jesus said no more. Pilate was amazed and began to wonder what was really going on.

⁶⁻⁸ A crowd approached Pilate, reminding him of the Passover tradition when, each year, the Romans released one prisoner chosen by the people. ⁹ 'Why don't I let your king of the Jews go free?' he asked, ¹⁰ knowing full well that the only thing Jesus had done wrong was to put the chief priests' noses out of joint. ¹¹ But they whipped up the crowds in favour of a revolutionary called Barabbas, who was serving time for murder during the latest insurrection against Roman rule.

¹² 'What about Jesus, then?' asked Pilate. 'What shall I do with him?' ¹³ 'Crucify him!' the crowd yelled. ¹⁴ 'Why? What's his crime?' demanded Pilate. But the crowd shouted him down. 'Crucify him!' they bayed. ¹⁵ Fearing a riot, Pilate set Barabbas free and gave orders for Jesus to be beaten and then crucified.

¹⁶ Pilate's troops took Jesus to their guardroom and called in their whole company. ¹⁷ They placed a purple cloak around his shoulders and a crude crown of thorns on his head ¹⁸ and began to taunt him. 'Hail the man who would be king!' ¹⁹ They beat him repeatedly with a rod and spat on him. They knelt in mock homage ²⁰ before stripping off the purple robe, dressing him in his own clothes and dragging him away to be executed.

²¹ As they marched Jesus through the streets, the soldiers grabbed a man called Simon, a visitor from Cyrene, who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, and made him help Jesus carry his cross. ²² Crucifixions were carried out a place called Golgotha (which means 'Place of the skull'), ²³ where they offered Jesus wine to deaden the pain, which he refused. ²⁴ They nailed him to a cross, and hung him out to die. Then they sat and gambled for his clothes. ²⁵ It was nine in the morning.

²⁶⁻²⁸ The custom was to fix a notice above each victim's head, detailing his crime. Jesus' read simply, 'The King of the Jews'. ²⁹ The bystanders hurled abuse at him and scorned him. 'Well look at this!' they crowed. 'The big-talker who was going to pull down our temple and rebuild it in three days has got his come-uppance!' ³⁰ Surely you can just step off the cross when you want?' ³¹ The priests and religious teachers joined in. 'He claimed to be our Saviour,' they jeered, 'but he can't even save himself!' ³² Jump off that cross and we might believe in you!' Even the thieves crucified either side of him reviled him.

³³ At noon the sky darkened and deep gloom covered the whole region until three in the afternoon, ³⁴ when Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' ³⁵ Some of the bystanders thought he was calling for Elijah. ³⁶ One of them put a sponge into wine vinegar and held it up for Jesus to drink. 'Now let's see if Elijah comes to save him.' ³⁷ With a great cry, Jesus let out his final breath.

³⁸ At that very moment, the curtain separating the most holy place in the temple from the outer courts was torn in two. ³⁹ The centurion on guard for the crucifixions saw Jesus die and said, 'Who else could this man be but God's own son?'

⁴⁰⁻⁴¹ A group of women, some from Jerusalem but many who had followed and supported Jesus in Galilee, stood forlornly at a distance, watching everything that happened.

⁴² Because Jesus had been executed on the day before the Jewish Day of Rest, his body had to be buried before sunset. So towards evening ⁴³ a prominent member of the Jewish Council, a man named Joseph, who came from Arimethea and was searching for the Kingdom of God, summoned the courage to ask Pilate for Jesus' body. ⁴⁴ Pilate suspected this a ploy to rescue Jesus before he died so he double-checked with the soldiers who had crucified Jesus. ⁴⁵ Satisfied that Jesus was indeed dead, he gave Joseph permission to remove the body. ⁴⁶ Joseph bought some cloth, wrapped the body and placed it into a tomb carved from the rock, placing a boulder over the entrance. ⁴⁷ Some of the women were still there, watching everything.

Mark Chapter 16

¹ The next day these same women bought spices to anoint Jesus' body. ² At sunrise, they headed for the tomb, ³ with one major concern: 'How will we manage to roll the boulder away?'

⁴ But when they arrived at the tomb they saw that the boulder, which was enormous, had already been moved. ⁵ They walked into the tomb and jumped at the sight of a young man sitting there, dressed all in white. ⁶ 'Don't be scared,' he said. 'I know why you're here. You're looking for a dead body, but he's alive and no longer here! See for yourself where his body was laid. ⁷ Go and tell his followers what you have seen. Tell them he's going to Galilee. He'll meet you all there just as he promised.'

⁸ They ran from the tomb, shaking with fear and incapable of thinking straight. They were too scared to tell anyone what had happened

The following verses are missing from the most ancient manuscripts

[⁹ Early that day Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene who'd followed him ever since he had driven seven evil spirits out of her. ¹⁰ She went and told the others, who were still grieving, that Jesus was alive and that she'd seen him. ¹¹ But they didn't believe her.

¹² Later that day, Jesus also appeared to two followers walking away from the city. ¹³ They came back into Jerusalem and told the others; but their testimony was also dismissed.

¹⁴ Jesus then interrupted his eleven original followers while they were eating, and rebuked them for their unbelief and their wilful refusal to accept the eyewitness accounts they'd been brought during the day. ¹⁵ He told them, 'Take this good news to everyone in every nation on earth. ¹⁶

Those who believe and are baptised will receive eternal life; those who refuse will not. ¹⁷ Amazing signs will mark out my followers. They will use my name to drive out evil spirits, speak unknown languages, ¹⁸ and handle snakes and drink poison without coming to harm. They will heal the sick simply by touching them.'

¹⁹ After saying this, Jesus rose into heaven and took his place at God's right hand. ²⁰ His followers began to tell people everywhere about God's invitation to new life, and to this day, wherever the message is proclaimed, God underlines its truth and power with miraculous signs and wonders.]