

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Seven – Mark 3:7-35

Mark 3:7-8 - Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon.

A Wide Area

John the Baptist was said to attract crowds from Judea and Jerusalem, but Jesus' popularity now extended throughout the width and breadth of ancient Israel – remarkable in a pre-Internet age.

Isaiah 43

Right of the bat, in 1:2, Mark indicated that Isaiah was the prophet whose words would most strongly resonate with the person and ministry of Jesus. This particular description of the extent of Jesus' popularity and mission can be found in Isaiah 43:

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour; Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by my name... Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf. All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble.

Mark 3:9-10 - Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him.

Crowds are Scary

Just this past week, 8 people were killed at a music concert by the press of a crowd. The same danger exists here, so Jesus makes sure to have his back to the lake, with a small boat ready to row him to safety. The NIV doesn't give us the intensity with which the passage is written – it isn't just a threat of being crowded, it is a threat of being “crushed.”

Even Scarier

The intensity ramps up – Jesus' reputation as a healer is such that those desperate to be healed – and who wouldn't be? – are “pushing forward to touch him.” Again, the original expression of intensity doesn't come across in this translation – the text literally says, “so that those with diseases were falling upon him to touch him” – literally, throwing themselves upon Jesus.

The Message

Jesus went off with his disciples to the sea to get away. But a huge crowd from Galilee trailed after them—also from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, across the Jordan, and around Tyre and Sidon—swarms of people who had heard the reports and had come to see for themselves. He told his disciples to get a boat ready so he wouldn't be trampled by the crowd. He had healed many people, and now everyone who had something wrong was pushing and shoving to get near and touch him.

Revise your Mental Image

These scenes paint a picture we are not accustomed to. But they convey a sense of immediacy – you can just imagine Peter recalling these chaotic scenes, fearing for the safety of Jesus in such circumstances. Having a boat to make a quick mistake is a Sea of Galilee version of, “Keep the car running!”

Mark 3:11-12 Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, “You are the Son of God.” But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him.

Strict orders

Once again, the presence of Jesus causes the impure spirits to come to the service and reveal themselves, like a powerful medicine forcing illness out of the body, or insecticide clearing out a nest. Jesus does not want the publicity which arises from such a source, and the language he uses to silence them is much stronger than “strict orders” - a sharp, severe rebuke, with, possibly, a suggestion of impending penalty.

Mark 3:13-15 - Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.

Which mountainside?

A source of much speculation, the phrase could mean a particular location, or simply up from the Capernaum coastline an onto what we now call the Golan Heights – a significant climb, the water level of the Sea of Galilee, which is sort of like a bowl, being over 200 metres below sea level. Mount Arbel would certainly be a scenic location, overlooking the whole area, but no one knows.

Could it be this one?

Mark 9:2 - After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. This seems like a likely location – but we don't know where it is. Some have speculated Mt. Tabor, but that's quite a stretch from the Sea of Galilee – some 50 KM.

Or this post-Resurrection meeting place

Matthew 28:16 - Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. It could be – but we aren't told which mountain that would be either!

“He called to him those he wanted”

There are already numerous people following Jesus, but there are twelve he has particularly in mind for apostolic ministry – those who would spend time closely with him, and also go out into the world representing Jesus, equipped with both the message he gave them and the power he shared with them.

Mark 3:14 - “He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach”

An Apostle's Defining Role - Compare this to Peter's description of the qualities needed to replace Judas: (Acts 1:21-22): *“Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”*

“to have authority to drive out demons”

The conflicts regularly arising with demonic powers would be a threat to the apostles, who are given power to counter these forces. However, we will discover that it isn't always enough (*Mark 9:18*): *“I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.” (28) After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn't we drive it out?” 29 He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”*

The Twelve

The huge multitude is thinned as Jesus invites “those he wanted” to come with him. This call creates a distinction between those who follow after him desperately seeking healing, those who are only caught up in the spectacle of these strange events, and those who are summoned to follow after him as disciples with a particular task. “Twelve” has symbolic significance, pointing to the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel, and Jesus stands over them as leader.

Mark 3:16-19 - These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Is there an order?

There seems to be an order of apostolic authority, with the “inner circle” of Simon Peter, James and John, followed by the rest, perhaps in order of their calling, with Judas bringing up the rear, as the Betrayer (Judas is always listed last in the order of the disciples, unsurprisingly).

Mark 3:20 - Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat.

“A house” – we are uncertain where this is, or whose house. Given the presence of his family in the area, it is possible that following the appointment of the Apostles, and given the chaotic crowd scenes in Capernaum, Jesus has withdrawn to Nazareth. “A house” is translated by some as “home.” As is common in Mark’s Gospel, Peter recalls there not being room or opportunity to eat!

Mark 3:21 - When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”

A surprising passage

Perhaps Jesus and the apostles are in Nazareth, and despite escaping Capernaum, they nevertheless attract a crowd, and sufficient commotion is made that his family is alerted. They decide to “take charge” or “take hold” of him – literally, drag him away – for they fear “he is out of his mind,” and will bring danger to himself or irreparable harm to the reputation of his family.

How could his family think he’s out of his mind?

We immediately assume that Mary is part of this evaluation, but perhaps it is only his brothers who make this judgement (Joseph is out of the picture by this point, almost certainly having predeceased Mary). Even so, how? And how is it that in the Gospel of John, they are described as not believing in Jesus (John 7:5 – “For even his own brothers did not believe in him”).

Who are these brothers?

Mark identifies them in a later chapter (6:3): ***“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?”*** It seems as though Jesus has quite an extensive family. But are these siblings, or step-siblings, or a mixture of both? Sadly, we know nothing of Jesus’ sisters. But what of the brothers?

It all goes back to Joseph

In very ancient Orthodox and Roman Catholic tradition, the brothers of Jesus are from a previous marriage of Joseph and an unnamed wife who died. Mary would then be Joseph’s second wife, and a step-mother to his (perhaps now-grown) children. They would have been of a sufficient age to not accompany Mary and Joseph to their time in Egypt. Their relationship with Jesus would then have been somewhat removed.

On the other hand...

It is possible that these brothers and sisters were born to Mary and Joseph, with Jesus as eldest child. Or, that these brothers and sisters are not immediate siblings, but children of Joseph and

Mary's extended family. But, the text does say "brothers and sisters!" Other sections of Scripture (Acts 1:14, Galatians 1:19) are quite specific about referring to Jesus' brothers.

Acts 1:14 - They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers...

Galatians 1:19 - I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother.

What about the other guys?

Nothing more is recorded of Simon and Joses in the New Testament, but an ancient tradition, preserved for us by the early church historian, Eusebius, states that Simon later became bishop of the church in Jerusalem and was finally crucified in the Roman persecutions under the emperor Trajan.

What about their children?

Eusebius: "There still survived of the kindred of the Lord the grandsons of Judas, who according to the flesh was called his brother. These were informed against, as belonging to the family of David, and Evocatus brought them before Domitian Caesar..."

Mark 3:22 And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

Beelzebul

The name may be a version of the name of a Philistine deity mockingly described as "the lord of the flies." Beelzebub (an alternate spelling) is identified as "the prince of the demons" in the so-called Testament of Solomon, an extremely odd book of a time shortly before Jesus, not recognised as Scripture, but well-known at the time as a "manual for exorcists".

Mark 3:23-27 - So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house.

Mudslinging

The teachers of the law may have concluded that one who flouts hallowed traditions and who does not bow to their authority could only be an undercover agent for Satan. On the other hand, they may be venomously attempting to undermine Jesus by branding him as the devil's spawn. Jesus simply replies that this doesn't make any sense – why would the devil fight the devil?

Mark 3:28-30 - Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.”

The Unforgivable Sin

Jesus warns them against blaspheming the Spirit – attributing the words, deeds, person and ministry of Jesus to an evil source, cutting one off from the source of forgiveness, and from the Kingdom of God. C.S. Lewis used the example of “the unopenable door” of Hell, which is locked from the inside – therefore unopenable by those who refuse to unlock it and gain freedom.

Mark 3:31-35 - Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.”

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

Mother, Brothers, Sisters

The gang is all here, including the sisters, although some manuscripts have only “your mother and your brothers.” Intending to bodily remove him from the situation, instead, they are unable to penetrate the crowd, and ask someone else to go and get him. Jesus’ response is shocking – “Who are my mother and my brothers?” We don’t feel the same level of shock and surprise as a Middle Eastern audience, in which family was absolutely everything.

Whoever does the will of God...

In a stunning move, Jesus redefines family as those united in the common cause of God. In the same way Christians are dual citizens, both citizens of an earthly realm and a heavenly Kingdom, so Christians have two families – their biological family, and their faith family, with God as Father and Jesus as Brother – and incredible honour.

Primary Allegiance

Even more revolutionary is the dangerous idea that for Christians, citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven demands primary loyalty over that of earthly citizenship; likewise, participation in the family of faith is of greater priority than biological allegiance.

Hard Words

This is what Jesus was getting at when he said, exaggerating for emphasis (*Luke 14:26*), “*If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.*”