“HAVE FAITH IN GOD”

Mark 11:1–25

Key Verse: 11:22

“‘Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered.”

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels; it has only 16 chapters. Of the 16 chapters, six of them, chapters 11–16, almost 40% of the book, cover what’s known as the Passion of the Christ, the final week of his life on earth. To Mark, Jesus’ rejection, suffering, death and resurrection are *that* important. Each year we tend to spend one or two Sundays on Easter. We like to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. But for it to be meaningful, we first need to understand everything leading up to it. So this year we’re going to be studying this last part of Mark’s Gospel over the next ten weeks. Consider it a slow and steady Easter celebration. Through this study we want to learn what’s so important about Jesus’ rejection, suffering, death and resurrection, and what it all means to us. Today’s passage kicks off the first three days of Holy Week. On Sunday Jesus enters Jerusalem as King. On Monday he curses a fig tree and clears the temple. On Tuesday morning he and his disciples encounter the fig tree withered and he teaches some important lessons. In these dramatic events and words, we see Jesus’ faith in God. It’s a faith he wants his disciples, and us, to learn. Today we want to think about some key questions: What kind of King is Jesus? What does it mean to receive him as our King? And how can we grow in the kind of faith he wants us to have? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

1. “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (1–10)

Until now in Mark’s Gospel Jesus has been keeping his identity a carefully guarded secret. But as he enters Jerusalem, he finally makes a public statement that he’s the promised Messiah. This event is recorded in all four Gospels. But unlike the others, Mark doesn’t emphasize a crowd; he keeps the focus on Jesus and on the joyful praises that people were shouting. Read verse 1. If we look at a map, Jesus and his disciples had just traveled from the east, from Jericho, on a sharply uphill road about eighteen miles long. (see pictures) Verse 1 mentions two villages, Bethany and Bethpage. They were the last two on the road before entering Jerusalem. (see pictures)

Verse 1b,2 says that as they approach this area, Jesus sends two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here.” Even before arriving, Jesus knows that a colt is there. And he wants these two disciples to bring it to him. Why does he want that colt? He’s planning to ride it as he enters Jerusalem. It’s not just because he’s too tired to walk anymore; he wants to enter Jerusalem as King. And he wants a colt that no one has ever ridden so that it could be used for this holy purpose. Jesus is intentionally fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9, which is actually quoted in Matthew and John’s account of this event: “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zech9:9,10). The colt and the prophecy tell us what kind of King Jesus is. He’s righteous and victorious. He's for all the nations, for people even at the ends of the earth. But he’s also lowly. Today it would be like the Pope riding in a Fiat, or President Obama in a Ford Fiesta. (see pictures) Jesus is so poor that he has no animal of his own and has to borrow this colt. It says he came to “proclaim peace to the nations.” He didn’t come to intimidate; he came as our humble friend, the friend of everybody, including even little children. He came to give us God’s peace.

At the same time Jesus is training his disciples. They don’t understand why he needs that colt. They must have serious reservations about taking someone else’s animal without permission. Jesus knows it. Read verse 3. It’s a scary assignment. They could get arrested as donkey thieves. How do they respond? Read verses 4–6. Jesus keeps training his disciples to trust and obey his words. Whenever they do, God helps them, even in impossible situations. This is a good illustration of faith in God, to simply trust and obey Jesus’ words, even when we don’t fully understand. So how does Jesus tell them to answer? He said, “The Lord needs it.” This short phrase means a lot. It tells us that Jesus is Lord. As Lord, he owns all things, including our lives. If he’s really our Lord, then he should be at the center of our lives. If he’s really our Lord, then we should be ready to live for him and serve in any way he needs. What does he need? It may be finances, or time. But what he really needs is real live people to be his hands and feet, to bring his gospel to people in our time. If we’re too busy with our own pursuits, we make ourselves unavailable for his use. Nobody likes to feel used. But we should be thankful to have the chance to be used by Jesus. This is another good illustration of faith in God, not to live for ourselves, but to offer whatever we have to our Lord Jesus—our time, our resources, even our lives.

What happens next? Look at verses 7,8. We notice that the word “cloaks” is repeated. Throwing their cloaks on the colt or on the road was a gesture of honor; they’re treating Jesus as their King. Some don’t have cloaks, so they cut branches to spread across the road where Jesus would be going. Though these people are poor, they’re doing their best to honor Jesus. Now let’s read verses 9,10. Some are going ahead of Jesus and others are following. They’re all shouting “Hosanna!” This was a Hebrew expression meaning “Save!” which became an exclamation of praise. They don’t realize it, but they’re crying out for Jesus to save them, which is what he really came to do. People were expecting Jesus to be a military or political king, but Jesus came only as our Spiritual King, to save us from sin and Satan. People are so happy that the Messiah has come at last. They’re so happy to have someone like Jesus as the Messiah—someone full of God’s love, grace and power. Read verse 9 again. They’re quoting Psalm 118:25,26. Usually people who had already arrived at the temple for Passover would shout this psalm at pilgrims still arriving in the city. But this time they’re shouting it at Jesus. They say he’s come “in the name of the Lord.” It means that though he’s King, his kingship is not his own ambition; he’s come in obedience to God. He’s come for the glory of God, to represent God and to bring the knowledge of God to his people. Read verse 10 again. They’re also saying that he’s coming to reestablish the kingdom of David. What kind of kingdom was David’s kingdom? It was a kingdom that united all God’s people. It was a kingdom centered on God, a kingdom of love and peace. It was a kingdom where God’s people were not oppressed anymore. David’s kingdom was just a shadow of the kingdom of Jesus. When Jesus comes as King to establish his kingdom, God’s grace, love and peace will rule over all. And there will be praise to God in the highest heaven. What do we learn here? We learn that we shouldn’t be like ambivalent spectators. Like these people, we should welcome Jesus as our King, joyfully and wholeheartedly. We should do our best to honor him, and put our hope in his kingdom. This is another illustration of faith in God, to welcome Jesus as our King, with great joy.

1. “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (11–18)

Look at verse 11. When he enters Jerusalem, the first place Jesus visits is the temple courts, even as he arrives very late. As King, he isn’t interested in politics or business, like most leaders; he’s most interested in the quality of his people’s worship of God. When he arrives at the temple courts, it says “he looked around at everything.” People have all gone home for the night, but they’ve left all the lambs, doves and pigeons to be used for the Passover sacrifice, and all the tables and benches set up for the next day. The temple courts look like a fully stocked grocery store closed for the night. Jesus is really unhappy that they’re using this holy place as a market. But for now, he quietly takes the Twelve with him back to the village of Bethany, to find a place to rest before the next big day.

Read verses 12–14. It seems like Jesus is “hangry,” like this morning he’s off to a bad start. But Jesus never lives by his feelings, cursing just because he can’t have what he wants. He does this intentionally, for his disciples to see and hear. It’s probably early April. In the distance he sees a fig tree already in leaf. Through its leaves it’s showing signs of life. He goes up to examine if it actually has any figs, but there are none. Like the Old Testament prophets before him, Jesus is acting out an allegory of God’s judgment on his people. In the person of Jesus God has come to see if his people have any spiritual fruit. Outwardly things look good. So many people have come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, supposedly to remember God’s grace of saving them. But mostly, their motives are not really for God; they just want to enjoy a holiday celebration. Throughout their history God has given the Israelites so many “second chances.” But now the time for second chances is over. The day before, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt, as the lowly, friendly King of peace. But here we see that Jesus is also the King who judges.

What happens next? Read verses 15,16. It’s a shocking act. If Jesus is hoping to win enough popularity to be King, he’s ruining his chances here. In these verses we notice that this morning in the temple courts there are money-changers, people selling doves, and others carrying merchandise. These are all activities related to celebrating Passover. Pilgrims had come from all over the Roman Empire. Some needed to change money to buy a sacrificial lamb. Some couldn’t afford a lamb, so they were buying doves as the offering of the poor. Some were buying other spices and herbs needed to prepare the Passover meal. And because it’s all being sold right here in the temple courts, consumers pay an added convenience fee. The merchants have an agreement with the religious leaders who run the temple. They pay part of the profit to them in order to do business there. People are happy because they don’t have to hassle to bring animals all the way from home, as God had wanted. They can exchange money and get all they need for the Passover meal right here at the temple. They don’t mind paying a higher price. Merchants are happy for the business. And the religious leaders are happy for the extra income. But God is not happy.

What does Jesus say? Read verse 17. He isn’t just turning over tables and benches in anger; Jesus is teaching from the Bible. He quotes two passages: Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. Jesus teaches that God’s temple should not be a den of robbers. Instead, it should be “a house of prayer for all nations.” People are using religion for personal convenience, benefit and profit; thus they’re robbing God of the glory and honor that is due him. People still try to use churches as a marketplace to increase their business, do networking or even hunt for a mate. God’s house should not be like a marketplace for people to make use of. It should be a holy place of prayer. It should be a place where sincere people can actually seek God. We should notice that this event takes place in the Courts of the Gentiles. (see picture) God didn’t want his temple in Jerusalem to be exclusive only for the Jews, for their use. He wanted the Gentiles, people from all nations, to come to his house to pray to him and seek him and find him there. But the Jews have filled this very place with animals, money-changers and merchandise, making it hard even to pray there. It reveals that they’ve completely lost God’s vision for them to be a blessing to the world. They don’t really care about Gentiles being able to come and seek God. They don’t even seem to be very aware of the presence of the holy God, in the holiest place, his temple. They certainly don’t seem to be very prayerful. So Jesus drives them out. All churches should take this passage very seriously. It tells us further what kind of King Jesus is. He’s the King of righteousness. He’s not satisfied with appearances. He wants our hearts to be right before God. He wants us to love and worship God wholeheartedly, not with a superficial, divided heart. Jesus has the right to rebuke us based on God’s truth, because he’s our King and Lord.

Then what happens? Look at verse 18. Though it’s shocking, the whole crowd there is amazed at Jesus’ teaching. They realize Jesus is right, and that what they’re doing is wrong. In their hearts the religious leaders know it, too, but their pride is hurt, and they can’t accept this because it’s coming from Jesus, the country carpenter. People don’t like to be called out for being wrong, especially by those they think are inferior to them. All of us so quickly go into self-defense mode. Though it’s painful, it’s good to humble ourselves and accept the truth, wherever it comes from. But these religious leaders are obsessed with politics. They’re worried about Jesus becoming more popular, and they want to stop him.

1. “Have faith in God” (19–25)

This last section is the climax of the passage. Read verses 19–21. Peter is shocked. No one ever witnesses a tree totally withering within 24 hours. And Jesus has never done anything like this before. He’s used his powers to heal, to give life and to bless, not to curse. Peter is worried. How does Jesus respond? Read verse 22. What does it mean? Is he inviting Peter to also start cursing random vegetation and see it torched, saying, “God will surely do it for you”? No. Jesus is teaching to believe in the power of his word. His word has the power to give life and the power to judge, the power to bring total change.

Jesus is also teaching us to look beyond ourselves and our situation to God himself. To “have faith in God” means to believe that God is not an idea; God is real. God is the living and almighty Creator God, and he’s still ruling this world. Sometimes in life we’re surrounded by problems and challenges that seem insurmountable, just like Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem. But Jesus says to us, “Have faith in God!” He challenges us to really look at God. When we do, people, the world and our problems look different. They shrink down to their proper perspective, and we see them in light of who God is. Earlier Jesus had taught, “Everything is possible for one who believes” (9:23). In fact, throughout his discipleship training in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has been repeatedly teaching his disciples two things: his compassion, and his faith in God. Without learning Jesus’ compassion and his faith in God, we can’t really be his disciples.

Jesus goes on to help them and us apply this faith. Read verse 23. Jesus wants us to have mountain-moving faith. He wants us to challenge completely impossible situations by faith in God. Jesus himself has been exemplifying such faith. Even going to Jerusalem was a great act of faith on the part of Jesus, for he knew what they would do to him there. Still, he believed in God who was working to accomplish his own salvation purpose, and that God Almighty would keep his promise, raise him from the dead and seat him at his own right hand. Going to Jerusalem to challenge the hypocritical and superficial religious system was like throwing a mountain into the sea. But Jesus had faith in God to do it. He found a colt to enter the city, only by faith in God. He cursed the fig tree by faith in God. He cleared the temple by faith in God. He spoke God’s truth by faith in God. Just as he did with servanthood, he’s teaching faith in God from his own life example.

He goes on to apply faith in God in some specific ways. Read verse 24. Jesus wants us to learn faith that prays. Sometimes, even to pray is a great act of faith. We feel crushed by our problems and situation. God seems far away, and even irrelevant. But Jesus encourages us to have faith in God to pray, and when we pray, to believe that God is actually listening and will answer our prayers. Sometimes it feels like we’re praying to deafening silence. But God is there, listening. In verses 23,24 Jesus repeats that we need to believe even before something happens. That’s *real* faith in God. Often, even if we *do* pray, in our hearts we don’t really believe. It’s not really prayer, and it leaves us powerless. Jesus wants us to believe when we pray. 1 John 5:14,15 says, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we ask of him.” We need to come to God confidently, believing he’s listening and that he’ll surely answer according to his will. Read verse 25. Jesus applies faith in God in another way. We need faith to forgive. Sometimes, forgiving is like moving a mountain. It seems impossible. We can’t get our hearts to feel it. But we need to decide to forgive, simply because it pleases God. Jesus is also saying here that, just like believing, forgiving is key to having our prayers answered. If we don’t believe, our prayers won’t be answered. Likewise, if we don’t forgive, our prayers also won’t be answered. When we stand praying before God, we need to come to him as forgiven sinners. Prayer and forgiveness were what should have been going on in the temple. They should be going on in us as Christians. They’re the secret to bearing the fruit God wants.

Today we learned that Jesus is our lowly, friendly King, but also the King of righteousness. We need faith to receive him as our King joyfully. He especially wants us to learn from him how to have faith in God practically.