

Preparing to Read Mark

Complete 16-Unit Reading Guide

Lazycat's Midnight Box

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01 | Creation

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The starting point: the world, humanity, and God

Bible reading: Genesis 1-2

This stage answers three questions:

Who is God? Who are human beings? What was the world originally like?

The Christian faith begins with some very basic questions: Where did this world come from? Why do human beings exist? The Bible gives its answer right at the beginning.

“At the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” — Genesis 1:1

According to the Bible, the world did not arise by chance, nor has it always existed. Everything in heaven and on earth has a Creator: God.

1. God Is the Creator

Genesis 1 describes God creating light, the sky, land, seas, plants, the sun, moon, and stars, animals, and finally human beings. As God completes the different parts of creation, the Bible repeatedly says, “God saw that it was good.”

“God looked at everything he had made, and it was all very good. Evening came, and morning came: the sixth day.” — Genesis 1:31

So, from the Bible’s perspective, this world was not originally evil. The land, plants, animals, human bodies, food, work, and relationships were all part of God’s good creation.

Christianity is not saying, “The material world is bad, and we should escape it.” Instead, it says, “The world was originally good, but something later went wrong.” We will consider what went wrong in the next stage.

2. What Makes Human Beings Different from Other Creatures?

“God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, according to our likeness, and let them govern the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created human beings in his own image; in his image he created them, male and female.” — Genesis 1:26-27

Human beings are also created by God, but they have a special identity: they are made in God's image.

This does not mean that people physically look like God. It means that human beings have a distinctive place and responsibility within creation. They are entrusted with caring for the world as God's representatives.

From the Christian perspective, then, a person's worth is not determined by wealth, ability, education, health, or social standing. Human dignity begins with this truth: we are all people whom God has made.

3. Human Beings Are Stewards, Not Owners of the World

"God blessed them and said to them, 'Have children and increase in number. Fill the earth and govern it; rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and every living creature that moves on the earth.'" — Genesis 1:28

"Governing" the earth here does not mean that people may destroy it as they please.

"The LORD God placed the man in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and watch over it." — Genesis 2:15

The human role is more like this: God entrusts the world he has created to people to care for and manage. People may use natural resources, but God remains their true owner.

4. Work Was Not Originally a Punishment

Many people think of work as something they have no choice but to do. Yet the Bible makes an interesting point: human beings already had work before they sinned.

"The LORD God placed the man in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and watch over it." — Genesis 2:15

According to Genesis, work itself is not a punishment. It was originally part of humanity's participation in caring for the world. Only after sin entered the world did work become exhausting and full of frustration.

5. Human Beings Also Need Rest

“By the seventh day, God had completed his work of making everything, and on that day he rested from all his work. God blessed the seventh day and set it apart as holy, because on that day he rested from all his work of creation.” — Genesis 2:2-3

This does not mean that God needed to rest because he was tired. It expresses that creation was complete. It also establishes an important idea: people do not exist merely to work without stopping. Both work and rest are normal parts of human life.

The later biblical understanding of the Sabbath is closely connected with this passage.

6. Human Beings Need Relationships with Other People

“The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion who is a fitting helper for him.’” — Genesis 2:18

This is the first appearance of “not good” in the first two chapters of Genesis. It does not mean that being single is necessarily bad. Rather, the creation story is pointing out that people were not made to live in complete isolation.

People need relationships, companionship, family, and community. God then creates the woman so that man and woman can be companions to one another.

7. The Original World Was a World of Harmony

The world portrayed in Genesis 1-2 has several important features:

- Humanity’s relationship with God is good.
- People’s relationships with one another are good.
- Humanity’s relationship with the natural world is also good.

People can live and work in the world God has made, enjoy food, build relationships, and be with God. This is how the biblical story begins.

8. The Basic Direction of the Biblical Story

As a simple starting point, we can understand the whole Bible in four stages:

Creation → Fall → Redemption → Restoration

For now, we have reached only the first step: creation. God creates a good world. Human beings are made in God’s image and given responsibility for caring for it.

But the world we see today is clearly not entirely good. We see war, violence, selfishness, disease, death, people hurting one another, and humanity damaging the natural world.

If the world God created was originally “very good,” what happened to it?

Next stage: The Fall — How did sin enter the world?

02 | The Fall

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Why has the world become the way it is?

Bible reading: Genesis 3–11

This stage answers three questions:

What is sin? What does sin bring about? Has God given up on humanity?

In the previous stage, we saw that the world God created was originally “very good.” Humanity’s relationships with God, with one another, and with nature were all harmonious. Yet the world we see today is clearly not like that. Beginning in Genesis 3, the Bible addresses the question: What happened to the world?

Christians usually call this turning point “the Fall.” This does not mean that people fell from a physical location. It means that they chose to turn away from God, and relationships that had been good began to break apart.

1. God Gives People Freedom, but Also a Boundary

“The LORD God commanded him, ‘You may freely eat fruit from any tree in the garden, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You must not eat its fruit, for on the day you eat it you will certainly die.’” — Genesis 2:16–17

God did not make people into beings capable only of mechanical obedience. The garden offered abundant provision for them to enjoy freely. At the same time, God gave them one clear boundary.

The tree, then, is not merely about whether they may eat a particular fruit. The deeper question is whether people are willing to trust God and acknowledge his authority to determine what is good.

2. Temptation Begins by Questioning God

“Among all the wild creatures the LORD God had made, the serpent was the most cunning. It said to the woman, ‘Did God really say you must not eat fruit from any of the trees in the garden?’” — Genesis 3:1

“The serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not necessarily die. God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’” — Genesis 3:4–5

The serpent does not begin by telling people to oppose God openly. First, it leads them to wonder: Can God’s words really be trusted? Is God deliberately withholding what is best from you?

The question shifts from “Should I eat a piece of fruit?” to “Will I trust God, or will I trust my own judgment?”

3. People Choose to Disobey God

“The woman saw that the tree’s fruit was good to eat, beautiful to look at, and desirable because it could give wisdom. So she picked some fruit and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate it too.” — Genesis 3:6

Adam and Eve know God’s command, yet choose to disobey it. The Bible calls this turning away from God “sin.”

Sin is not limited to serious wrongdoing such as murder or theft. Its more fundamental problem is that people no longer want to trust and obey God, but instead want to live on their own terms.

Sin is not only “doing something wrong.” It also involves a broken relationship between people and God.

4. The First Result: Shame and Hiding

“The eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together to make coverings for themselves.” — Genesis 3:7

“As the cool breeze came, the LORD God walked in the garden. The man and his wife heard God and hid among the garden’s trees, away from the LORD God’s presence. The LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’” — Genesis 3:8-9

Before sinning, people could face God and one another without fear. Afterward, the first obvious changes are shame, fear, and hiding.

This shows that sin first damages humanity’s relationship with God. People begin to fear the Creator who had been close to them.

5. The Second Result: People Begin Shifting Blame

“The man said, ‘The woman you gave to live with me gave me fruit from that tree, and I ate it.’ The LORD God asked the woman, ‘What have you done?’ She replied, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate it.’” — Genesis 3:12-13

Instead of first acknowledging his own choice, Adam blames the woman. The woman in turn blames the serpent.

Suspicion, accusation, and conflict begin to appear in relationships that had been harmonious. Sin affects not only individuals; it also damages relationships between people.

6. The Third Result: Life Becomes Filled with Pain and Death

“You will earn your food by the sweat of your face until you return to the ground, for you were taken from it. You are dust, and to dust you will return.” — Genesis 3:19

In the previous stage, we saw that work itself was originally good. Work still exists now, but it has become toilsome. Human life also begins to move toward death.

Sin therefore brings more than “punishment for doing something wrong.” It damages the whole of human life: relationships with God and with others, work, and life itself.

7. Humanity Leaves the Garden of Eden

“The LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to cultivate the ground from which he had been taken. After driving him out, God placed cherubim east of the garden and a flaming sword turning in every direction, to guard the way to the tree of life.” — Genesis 3:23-24

People lose their original life in Eden, along with the close presence of God they once enjoyed. This becomes an important question throughout the rest of the Bible: Can people ever return to God’s presence?

8. Sin Quickly Spreads from Individuals to the Whole of Human Society

Genesis does not treat Adam and Eve’s story as an isolated event. From chapter 4 onward, sin immediately spreads through human society. Adam and Eve’s son Cain kills his younger brother Abel out of jealousy.

“While the two were out in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.” — Genesis 4:8

By Genesis 6, the Bible gives a deeply sobering description of humanity:

“The LORD saw that human wickedness on the earth was great, and that the thoughts people entertained all day long were nothing but evil.” — Genesis 6:5

The story moves from one person’s disobedience to a brother’s murder, and then to widespread violence and corruption in society. This is the setting for the story of the flood.

9. After the Flood, Humanity's Fundamental Problem Remains

The flood brings judgment and gives Noah's family a fresh beginning. Yet Genesis does not say that humanity becomes good from then on. The problem is not merely the outward environment: people themselves are still inclined to turn away from God.

"The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said within himself, 'I will not again curse the ground because of humanity ... for people's hearts harbor evil thoughts from their youth.'" — Genesis 8:21

This leaves a question for the biblical story that follows: If even a fresh start cannot cure humanity's problem, what kind of rescue do people really need?

10. The Tower of Babel: People Seek to Make a Name for Themselves

"They said, 'Come, let us build a city and a tower whose top reaches the heavens. We will make a name for ourselves, so that we will not be scattered over the whole earth.'" — Genesis 11:4

The problem with Babel is not simply that a building is too tall. The story draws particular attention to the people's words: "We will make a name for ourselves." They want to establish security, greatness, and fame by their own power.

God confuses their language, and the people scatter to different places. Genesis 1-11 thus presents a picture of humanity: people possess abilities and can build civilizations, but the problem of sin has not disappeared.

11. God Does Not Immediately Give Up on Humanity

Even when people disobey God in Eden, God takes the initiative to call to Adam. He also prepares clothing for Adam and Eve.

"The LORD God made garments of animal skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them." — Genesis 3:21

After the flood, God also makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants:

"I establish my covenant with you: no living creatures will ever again be wiped out by a flood, and no flood will again destroy the earth." — Genesis 9:11

Genesis 3-11 therefore shows us two things at once: humanity's rebellion grows more serious, yet God has not stopped engaging with people or abandoned the

world he created.

12. Key Points from This Stage

- The world God created was originally good.
- People chose to distrust and disobey God; the Bible calls this turning away “sin.”
- Sin damages humanity’s relationships with God, with one another, and with the world.
- Death, toil, violence, and disorder enter human life.
- Sin quickly spreads from an individual problem into a problem for all human society.
- Even so, God has not given up on humanity.

13. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

By Genesis 11, humanity has scattered into many peoples. The world still belongs to God, but humanity’s relationship with him has broken down.

Next, the Bible’s focus suddenly narrows from “all humanity” to one person. God calls a man named Abram and gives him an extremely important promise.

Humanity has scattered, but God begins a new plan:

Through one man and his descendants, he will bring blessing to all peoples.

Next stage: Abraham — God begins a plan of redemption

03 | Abraham

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God begins a plan to bless all peoples

Bible reading: Genesis 12–22 (selected passages)

This stage introduces three important promises:

Descendants · Land · Blessing for all peoples

In the previous stage, we saw that Genesis 1–11 tells the story of all humanity: people turn away from God, sin and violence keep spreading, and humanity finally scatters across the earth after the events at Babel.

In Genesis 12, the story suddenly narrows from “all humanity” to one person: Abram. God later changes his name to “Abraham.” With this man, the Bible begins a new main storyline.

1. God Calls Abram

“The LORD said to Abram, ‘Leave your land, your people, and your father’s household, and go to the land I will show you.’” — Genesis 12:1

Abram has been living in his homeland, with his own family and an established life. Yet God calls him to leave what is familiar and travel to a place he does not yet clearly know.

This is the beginning of trust. Abram does not set out because he already knows every detail, but because he trusts the God who calls him.

2. God Gives Abraham Three Important Promises

“I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great, and you will bring blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you, and curse the one who curses you. Through you, all the peoples of the earth will receive blessing.” — Genesis 12:2–3

This passage is a major turning point in the whole Bible. As a starting point, we can arrange God’s promises to Abraham in three parts:

- Descendants: God will cause his family to grow into a people.
- Land: God will give his descendants a land in which to live.
- Blessing: God will not only bless Abraham, but through him bring blessing to “all the peoples of the earth.”

God chooses Abraham not merely to bless one family, but to carry blessing to all peoples.

3. Why Is “Blessing for All Peoples” So Important?

The preceding story of Babel describes humanity scattering into different peoples. Immediately afterward, God calls Abraham and promises that “through you, all the peoples of the earth will receive blessing.”

From the very beginning, then, God’s plan concerns more than one people. Israel will become a central participant in the story, but God’s ultimate purpose still reaches toward every nation and people.

This is particularly important for readers like us who are not Jewish: the biblical story will eventually include the Gentiles as well.

4. Abraham Actually Has No Children at This Point

God says he will make Abraham a great nation, but there is a very practical difficulty: Abraham and his wife Sarai have no children, and they are already advanced in age.

“Abram said, ‘Lord GOD, since I have no child, what can you give me?’” — Genesis 15:2

The promise of descendants is therefore not something that looks easy to fulfill. Abraham himself has doubts.

“God brought him outside and said, ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars—if you can count them.’ Then he told him, ‘That is how numerous your descendants will be.’” — Genesis 15:5

5. Abraham Believes God’s Promise

“Abram put his trust in the LORD, and the LORD counted that trust as righteousness.” — Genesis 15:6

This does not mean Abraham never doubts again, or that he becomes someone who can no longer make mistakes. The later stories still record his weaknesses and failures.

The point is that he continues to place his trust in God even when he cannot see how the promise will be fulfilled.

“Faith” here is not merely accepting the existence of certain religious facts. It means trusting what God has said.

6. God Makes a Covenant with Abraham

The Bible often uses an important word: “covenant.” For now, we can understand a covenant as a formal relationship involving commitment. God takes the initiative in making promises to Abraham and confirming his relationship with Abraham and his descendants.

“I will establish my covenant with you and with your descendants, generation after generation, as an everlasting covenant, to be your God and the God of your descendants. I will give you and your descendants the land where you now live as a stranger—all the land of Canaan—as an enduring possession, and I will be their God.” — Genesis 17:7-8

From this point onward, “God, Abraham’s descendants, and the promised land” become an important combination in the biblical story.

7. Abram Becomes Abraham

“Your name will no longer be Abram, but Abraham, because I have appointed you to be the father of many nations.” — Genesis 17:5

When reading the Bible, then, we find the same person called “Abram” at first and “Abraham” later. These are not two different people; God has changed his name.

His wife Sarai is later renamed “Sarah” as well.

8. Isaac, the Promised Son, Is Born

After Abraham and Sarah have waited for many years, Sarah finally gives birth to a son, whom they name Isaac.

“The LORD cared for Sarah just as he had said, and did for her what he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time God had appointed. Abraham named the son Sarah bore him Isaac.” — Genesis 21:1-3

Isaac’s birth matters because God’s earlier promise of descendants begins to take concrete shape.

But Isaac is still only one child. There is a long story ahead before one child becomes a whole people.

9. Abraham Is Not a Perfect Hero

The Bible does not portray Abraham as a saint who never makes mistakes. Out of fear, he says that Sarah is his sister. While waiting for the promise, he also tries to solve the problem in his own way, causing conflict within the family.

This is important: the Bible's central characters are not "a group of perfect people." Abraham matters primarily not because he has no faults, but because God calls him, makes promises to him, and begins a plan of redemption through his life.

10. The Test of Offering Isaac

Genesis 22 records a very difficult story: God tests Abraham by asking him to offer Isaac. For Abraham, Isaac is not only his son, but also the very descendant God has promised.

"The angel said, 'Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not harm him at all! Now I know that you fear God, because you have not held back your son—your only son—from me.'" — Genesis 22:12

In the end, God prevents Abraham from harming Isaac and provides an offering in his place. The story first shows Abraham's trust in God being severely tested; it also confirms once again that God's promise will continue.

"Through your descendants, all the nations of the earth will receive blessing, because you have listened to my voice." — Genesis 22:18

11. The Main Point Is Not "How Great Abraham Was"

If we read Abraham's story only as "a person with faith became successful," we miss the larger storyline.

What truly matters is this: after humanity turned away from God and scattered across the earth, God did not abandon the world. Instead, he took the initiative and began a plan. He called Abraham, promised to form a people from his descendants, and intended ultimately to bring blessing to all peoples.

Abraham's story is not the destination, but a new starting point in the history of redemption.

12. Key Points from This Stage

- God takes the initiative in calling Abraham to leave his homeland and follow his leading.

- God promises Abraham “descendants, land, and blessing.”
- God’s purpose reaches beyond Abraham’s family: “Through you, all the peoples of the earth will receive blessing.”
- Abraham believes God’s promise, but he is not someone who never makes mistakes.
- God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising to be his God and the God of his descendants.
- Sarah gives birth to Isaac, and the promise of descendants begins to take concrete shape.

13. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

Abraham now has Isaac, but the “great nation” God spoke of has not yet appeared. The promise will next pass from Abraham to Isaac, and then to Isaac’s son Jacob.

Jacob later receives a new name: “Israel.” His twelve sons eventually become the source of Israel’s twelve tribes.

One person’s calling will gradually become the story of a whole people.

Next stage: The formation of Israel — Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes

04 | Jacob's Family and the Twelve Tribes of Israel

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From one family to twelve tribes and Egypt

Bible reading: Genesis 21, 25, 32, 35, 37, 45–50 (selected passages)

This stage answers one question:

How did Abraham's family become the people called "Israel"?

In the previous stage, we saw God call Abraham and promise him descendants, land, and blessing for all peoples through him. Genesis now focuses on Abraham's family, explaining how this family gradually becomes the people of Israel.

1. Isaac: The Promised Son

Abraham and his wife Sarah remain childless into old age, but God has promised them descendants. At last, Sarah gives birth to Isaac.

"The LORD cared for Sarah just as he had said, and did for her what he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time God had appointed. Abraham named the son Sarah bore him Isaac." — Genesis 21:1–3

Isaac's importance is not in the number of great deeds he performs, but in what he represents: God's promise to Abraham has not been interrupted. Abraham's family will continue through Isaac.

2. Jacob: From One Person's Name to "Israel"

Isaac later has two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob becomes the one through whom this family of promise continues.

"The LORD said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will come from you. One will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.'" — Genesis 25:23

Jacob's life is far from perfect. He deceives his father and brother, and experiences flight, conflict, and many family problems. Yet God continues to work in his life.

"The man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with people, and have prevailed.'" — Genesis 32:28

“Israel” is originally Jacob’s new name. Only later does it become the name of his descendants, an entire people, and even a nation.

3. Twelve Sons: The Origin of the Twelve Tribes

Jacob has twelve sons, whose descendants later form Israel’s twelve tribes. This is why the expression “the twelve tribes of Israel” appears so often as we continue reading the Bible.

“God also said to him, ‘I am God Almighty. Have children and increase in number. A people and many nations will come from you, and kings will descend from you. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you and your descendants.’” — Genesis 35:11-12

For now, remember this simple family line:

- Abraham: God calls him and promises that his descendants will become a great people.
- Isaac: God’s promise continues through him.
- Jacob/Israel: “Israel” is originally Jacob’s new name.
- Jacob’s twelve sons: Their descendants form the twelve tribes of Israel.

4. Joseph: Why Does the Family Go to Egypt?

Among Jacob’s twelve sons, Joseph’s story is especially important. His experiences explain why Jacob’s family, originally living in Canaan, later moves to Egypt.

Joseph is dearly loved by his father, which makes his older brothers jealous. They eventually sell him, and he is taken to Egypt.

“Joseph’s brothers saw that their father loved Joseph more than he loved them. They hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.” — Genesis 37:4

Joseph experiences many setbacks in Egypt, yet eventually becomes a trusted official of Pharaoh, responsible for managing food supplies. When famine later strikes Canaan, his brothers have no choice but to buy food in Egypt.

“Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Please come closer.’ They came to him, and he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves for selling me here. God sent me ahead of you to preserve life.’” — Genesis 45:4-5

5. Even an Evil Act Does Not Interrupt God's Plan

The brothers' sale of Joseph is, of course, an evil act. The Bible does not call their behavior good. Yet the story ultimately shows that even when people do wrong, God can continue advancing his plan in the midst of the disorder.

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good: to preserve many lives and bring about what we see today." — Genesis 50:20

This does not mean "wrongdoing is acceptable as long as the outcome is good." It means that human sin and failure cannot make God lose control of his plan.

6. Jacob's Family Moves to Egypt

As the famine continues, Jacob takes his whole family to Egypt. God assures him that he need not be afraid to go there.

"God said, 'I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, because there I will make you into a great people. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will certainly bring you back up. Joseph will be with you when you die.'" — Genesis 46:3-4

By the end of Genesis, then, Abraham's descendants have gradually grown from a small household into a large extended family, now living in Egypt.

7. Becoming a People Also Brings a New Crisis

By the time of Exodus, Jacob's descendants have become numerous. The Bible says:

"The Israelites had many children and multiplied. They became exceedingly numerous and strong, filling the land. A new king, who did not know Joseph, rose to rule Egypt." — Exodus 1:7-8

The new king of Egypt does not remember Joseph's contribution to the country. Instead, he begins to see the large Israelite population as a threat.

The family God promised to make into a great people has indeed grown numerous. Yet they are also about to lose their freedom in Egypt.

8. Key Points from This Stage

- Abraham's son Isaac carries forward the promise of descendants.
- Isaac's son Jacob later receives the new name "Israel."
- Jacob's twelve sons become the source of Israel's twelve tribes.

- Joseph is sold into Egypt by his brothers, but later becomes an important official there.
- Famine leads Jacob's whole family to settle in Egypt.
- As the Israelite population grows greatly, a new Egyptian king begins to view them as a threat.

9. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

At the end of Genesis, the Israelites are living in Egypt. At the beginning of Exodus, they have become a numerous people. But a new Pharaoh begins oppressing them and even makes them slaves.

At this point, the biblical story introduces its next major figure: Moses. Through him, God will bring the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

If God promised to make Abraham's descendants a great people, why does this people end up enslaved in Egypt?

Next stage: The Exodus and Moses — God rescues his people

05 | The Exodus and Moses

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God rescues his people

Bible reading: Exodus 1–19 (selected passages)

This stage answers three questions:

Why did the Israelites become slaves? How did God rescue them? Why is the Exodus so important?

In the previous stage, we saw Jacob and his family move to Egypt because of a famine. At first they were treated well because of Joseph. Many years later, however, a new king arose in Egypt who “did not know Joseph.” The Israelites’ situation gradually changed from that of foreign residents to that of oppressed slaves.

1. The Israelites Become Slaves in Egypt

The Israelites grow increasingly numerous in Egypt. The new Pharaoh begins to fear them, worrying that they might become a threat, so he oppresses them with forced labor.

“The Egyptians forced the Israelites to work ruthlessly, making their lives bitter with hard labor. Whether mixing mortar, making bricks, or doing every kind of fieldwork, they were treated harshly in all their labor.” — Exodus 1:13–14

Pharaoh even orders Israelite baby boys to be killed. It is in this setting that a child named Moses is born.

2. Moses Is Preserved from Death

When Moses is born, Pharaoh has already ordered Hebrew baby boys to be thrown into the river. Moses’ mother hides him for three months, then places him in a basket made of reeds beside the river. Pharaoh’s daughter discovers him, adopts him, and names him “Moses.”

“When the child grew older, the woman brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, ‘Because I drew him out of the water.’” — Exodus 2:10

After growing up, Moses kills an Egyptian who is mistreating a Hebrew. He has to flee Egypt and settles in Midian. Many years will pass before he returns to Egypt.

3. God Hears the Cries of His Suffering People

The Israelites cry out to God in their slavery. Exodus particularly emphasizes that God has not forgotten the covenant he previously made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

“The Israelites groaned and cried out because of their hard labor, and their cries reached God. God heard them and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God watched over the Israelites and knew their suffering.” — Exodus 2:23-25

God has neither forgotten his promises nor overlooked his people’s suffering.

4. God Calls Moses

While Moses is tending sheep in Midian, God appears to him in a bush that burns without being consumed. God calls him to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out.

“The LORD said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries under their taskmasters, and I know their pain. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians’ power.’” — Exodus 3:7-8

“So I am sending you to Pharaoh, to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” — Exodus 3:10

Moses does not immediately agree with complete confidence. He worries that he is not good enough, that he cannot speak well, and that the people will not believe him. God nevertheless promises to be with him and appoints his older brother Aaron to help him.

5. “I Am the One Who Exists of Himself, Forever”

Moses asks God what he should say if the Israelites ask, “What is his name?” God gives a profoundly important answer.

“God said to Moses, ‘I am the One who exists of himself, forever.’ He also said, ‘Tell the Israelites: The One who is has sent me to you.’” — Exodus 3:14

There is no need at this stage to delve into the linguistic questions surrounding God’s name. For those exploring the faith, it is enough to remember this: Moses does not represent his own power, but the God who truly exists and who made a covenant with Israel’s ancestors.

6. Pharaoh Refuses to Let the Israelites Leave

Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and ask him to let the Israelites leave Egypt to worship God. Pharaoh refuses.

“Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel leave!’” — Exodus 5:2

Disasters then strike Egypt one after another. These are usually called the ten plagues in the biblical account:

- Water turns to blood
- Frogs
- Lice or gnats
- Flies
- Disease among the livestock
- Boils
- Hail
- Locusts
- Darkness
- The death of the firstborn

These disasters are both a judgment on Pharaoh’s persistent refusal and a demonstration that Egypt’s power is not supreme. God is the Lord who can rescue Israel.

7. Passover: A Name to Remember

Before the last plague comes, God tells every Israelite household to prepare a lamb, put its blood on the doorframe, and eat the lamb that night with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

“This blood will be a sign on the houses where you live. When I see the blood, I will pass over you. When I strike the firstborn in Egypt, the disaster will not fall on you and destroy you.” — Exodus 12:13

“Passing over” is the important background to the name “Passover.” The Israelites later commemorate this every year, remembering how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt.

Keep the name “Passover” in mind. In the final chapters of Mark, the story of Jesus’ suffering takes place during Passover.

8. The Israelites Leave Egypt

After the plague on the firstborn, Pharaoh finally allows the Israelites to leave. Once they have set out, however, he changes his mind and sends his army after them. With the sea ahead and the Egyptian army behind, the people are terrified.

“Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and watch the rescue the LORD will accomplish for you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only remain still and quiet.’” — Exodus 14:13-14

“Moses stretched his staff over the sea. Throughout the night, the LORD drove the waters back with a strong east wind. The waters divided and the sea became dry ground. The Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground, with water standing like walls on their right and left.” — Exodus 14:21-22

The Israelites cross safely, while the pursuing Egyptian army is overwhelmed by the sea. This becomes one of the most important acts of rescue in the Old Testament.

9. The Exodus Is More Than an Escape

If we see this story only as a group of slaves successfully escaping from Egypt, we miss the Bible’s main point. The Israelites do not defeat Egypt through their own military strength. God takes the initiative in rescuing them.

At the heart of the Exodus is this: God rescues an enslaved people so that they may belong to him again.

“Salvation” or “rescue” thus becomes a major biblical theme. Whenever the Israelites look back on who they are, they remember: We were once slaves in Egypt, and God brought us out.

10. Where Will They Go after Being Rescued?

Leaving Egypt is not the end of the story. God leads the Israelites into the wilderness and eventually to Mount Sinai.

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you as an eagle carries its young on its wings, bringing you to myself.” — Exodus 19:4

The order matters: God first rescues the Israelites from slavery. Only afterward, at Sinai, does he make a covenant with them and tell them how to live as his people.

In other words, they do not first earn God's rescue by keeping the law. They are rescued by God first, and receive the law afterward.

11. Key Points from This Stage

- The Israelites are oppressed by Pharaoh and become slaves in Egypt.
- God hears their cries, remembers his covenant, and calls Moses to lead them out of Egypt.
- Pharaoh refuses to let the people leave, and Egypt experiences the ten plagues.
- Passover becomes an important festival in which the Israelites remember God's rescue.
- God leads the Israelites through the sea, out of Egypt, and toward Mount Sinai.

12. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

The Israelites have left Egypt. Next, at Mount Sinai, God will make a covenant with them, give them the law and the Ten Commandments, and gradually establish the tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrificial system. This background is important for reading the rest of the Old Testament, and it will appear repeatedly in Mark as well.

After being rescued, how are the Israelites to become a people who truly belong to God?

Next stage: The Sinai Covenant and the Law — Becoming God's people

06 | The Sinai Covenant and the Law

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 06 of 16

Becoming God's people

Bible reading: Exodus 19–40 and Leviticus (selected passages)

This stage answers three questions:

What is a covenant? Why does God give the law? What are the tabernacle, priests, and sacrifices for?

In the previous stage, we saw God rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and lead them to Mount Sinai. The story now moves from “leaving Egypt” to another question: How will these rescued people become a people who truly belong to God?

1. God Makes a Covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai

After the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai, God explains the meaning of this relationship through Moses.

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you as an eagle carries its young on its wings, bringing you to myself. Now, if you truly listen to my voice and keep my covenant, you will be my own people among all peoples, for the whole earth is mine. You will belong to me as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” — Exodus 19:4–6

Here again we see a very important order: God first rescues the Israelites from Egypt, then makes a covenant with them. The law is not a condition by which they can purchase rescue. It tells people who have already been rescued how they are to live from now on.

Rescue comes first; the law comes afterward. The Israelites do not leave Egypt by earning their way out through law-keeping.

2. What Is a Covenant?

“Covenant” is an extremely important biblical concept. For now, we can understand it as a formal relationship involving promises and responsibilities. God takes the initiative in establishing a relationship with Israel, and Israel is to be faithful to him and live in the way he gives them.

A covenant, then, includes more than rules. It also includes an identity: God will be their God, and they will be his people.

We have already seen God make a covenant with Abraham. Now, at Sinai, God establishes a fuller covenant way of life with Abraham's descendants—the people of Israel.

3. The Ten Commandments: A Core Starting Point of the Law

At Sinai, God gives the Ten Commandments. They are not the whole law, but they are among its most important commands for Israel's covenant life with God.

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, the place of slavery. You must have no other gods besides me." — Exodus 20:2-3

We can begin by remembering the Ten Commandments in simple terms:

- Worship God alone; have no other gods.
- Do not make idols for yourselves to worship.
- Do not misuse God's name.
- Remember the Sabbath and set it apart as holy.
- Honor your father and mother.
- Do not murder.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not steal.
- Do not give false testimony against someone.
- Do not covet what belongs to others.

The earlier commands mainly concern how people worship God; the later ones deal extensively with relationships between people. This also shows that biblical faith is not limited to worshiping God through religious ceremonies. It includes how we treat others in daily life.

4. The Law Contains More Than Ten Commands

After the Ten Commandments, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy record many additional laws. They concern different parts of Israelite life, including:

- How to worship God and avoid idol worship.
- Family, property, and relationships.
- How to deal with wrongdoing, injury, and compensation.

- How to treat the poor, resident foreigners, and vulnerable people.
- The Sabbath and various festivals.
- Food, cleanness, and uncleanness.
- Priests, the tabernacle, and sacrifices.

These laws were first given to ancient Israel as a covenant community. When we later read the New Testament, therefore, we must not detach every Old Testament law from its original setting and directly treat it as an identical rule for everyone in every era.

5. Why Is the Sabbath So Important?

The fourth of the Ten Commandments concerns the Sabbath. For the Israelites, it is more than “one day off each week.” It is an important part of their covenant life with God.

“Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Work for six days and complete your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.” — Exodus 20:8-10

The Sabbath reminds the Israelites that work and production do not wholly determine their lives. It also reminds them that God is their Creator and Rescuer.

Keep the Sabbath in mind. In Mark, Jesus and the Pharisees repeatedly dispute matters concerning the Sabbath.

6. What Do “Holy” and “Clean” Mean?

The words “holy,” “clean,” and “unclean” appear frequently in the law. First-time Bible readers can easily assume that “unclean” simply means dirty or sinful, but these are not exactly the same.

In Israel’s ritual system, contact with a dead body, certain diseases, bodily discharges, or other circumstances could make a person temporarily “unclean.” This status affected whether the person could take part in certain acts of worship, but did not necessarily mean that they had done something morally wrong.

“I am the LORD your God. You must therefore be holy, because I am holy.” — Leviticus 11:44

These practices continually remind the Israelites in daily life that they are a people set apart, belonging to God.

“Uncleanness” does not necessarily equal “sin.” This distinction matters when reading about the man with leprosy, the woman with continual bleeding, and the

disputes over cleanness in Mark.

7. The Tabernacle: A Sign That God Dwells among His People

God not only gives the law, but also commands the Israelites to build a “tabernacle.” It is a portable place of worship and an important center of Israel’s worship before the temple in Jerusalem exists.

“They are also to make a sanctuary for me, so that I may dwell among them.”
— Exodus 25:8

The tabernacle’s chief significance is not how magnificent it looks. It shows that the God who rescued Israel is willing to dwell among his people.

After Israel settles in the land, the temple in Jerusalem gradually takes over the tabernacle’s functions. Understanding the tabernacle will therefore help us understand the temple later.

8. What Do Priests Do?

God appoints priests to oversee worship, sacrifices, and related rituals in the tabernacle. Moses’ older brother Aaron and his descendants hold an important priestly office.

“From among the Israelites, bring your brother Aaron and his sons Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar near to you, so that they may serve me as priests.”
— Exodus 28:1

Priests are not another kind of god, nor do they replace God. They are people appointed to serve within Israel’s system of worship, responsible for matters involving the tabernacle, sacrifices, and purification.

In Jesus’ time, the priesthood still exists and is closely connected with the temple in Jerusalem.

9. Why Offer Sacrifices?

Leviticus records several kinds of offerings and ways of presenting them. Not every sacrifice is solely about “receiving forgiveness after sinning.” Some also concern thanksgiving, worship, fellowship, and dedication.

Yet sin and atonement are indeed important parts of the sacrificial system.

“The life of a living creature is in its blood. I have given you this blood to make atonement for your lives on the altar. Because blood contains life, it can make atonement.” — Leviticus 17:11

For beginners, it is enough to remember that “sin, atonement, offerings, and priests” are closely connected within Israel’s worship. These terms appear again in the New Testament, where they help people understand Jesus’ death.

10. The Israelites Soon Break the Covenant

Even after witnessing the Exodus and receiving God’s words at Sinai, the Israelites soon fail. While Moses remains on the mountain for a long time, the people make a golden calf and worship it.

“They have quickly turned away from the path I commanded them to follow. They have cast a calf for themselves, bowed before it, and offered sacrifices to it, saying, ‘Israel, this is the god who brought you out of Egypt.’” — Exodus 32:8

This reveals a problem that will recur: God has rescued the people and given them the law, but their hearts do not automatically become completely faithful as a result.

Yet God does not immediately end his relationship with the people. Moses intercedes for them, and God once again reveals his character.

“The LORD, the LORD: a God of compassion and grace, slow to anger, abundant in steadfast love and faithfulness.” — Exodus 34:6

11. Key Points from This Stage

- God first rescues Israel from Egypt, then makes a covenant with them at Sinai and gives them the law.
- A covenant is a relationship involving promises and responsibilities: God is their God, and they are his people.
- The Ten Commandments are an important core of the law, but the law of Moses also covers worship, social life, festivals, cleanness, justice, and many other areas.
- The Sabbath, cleanness and uncleanness, priests, and sacrifices will all appear again when we read Mark.
- The tabernacle symbolizes God dwelling among his people; the temple in Jerusalem later takes over important functions of worship.
- Even with the law, the Israelites continue to sin, showing that humanity’s problem is more than a lack of rules.

12. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

The Israelites have become God's covenant people, but they have not yet entered the land he promised Abraham's descendants. Next, they must learn to trust God in the wilderness. Their unbelief and rebellion will also make the journey longer than they originally imagined.

Will a people who have already been rescued and given the law really follow God faithfully?

Next stage: The Wilderness and the Promised Land — From unbelief to entering Canaan

07 | The Wilderness and the Promised Land

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 07 of 16

From unbelief to entering Canaan

Bible reading: Numbers 13–14, 20, 27; Joshua 1–6 (selected passages)

This stage answers three questions:

Why did the Israelites spend forty years in the wilderness? Who led them into Canaan? What does the “promised land” mean?

In the previous stage, we saw the Israelites make a covenant with God at Mount Sinai, receive the law, and establish the tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrificial system. Yet they have not arrived in the land God promised Abraham’s descendants. The journey ahead reveals an important question: Are people who have been rescued by God truly willing to trust him?

1. God Had Promised Abraham a Land

As far back as Abraham’s time, God promised to give Canaan to his descendants. By Moses’ time, Israel has become a people, and now they are heading toward this promised land.

“I will give this land to your descendants.” — Genesis 12:7

Entering Canaan, then, is not a new plan that appears out of nowhere. It continues the earlier covenant with Abraham.

The descendants have become a people. Next, the promise of land will also begin to be fulfilled.

2. Twelve Scouts See the Same Land but Reach Different Conclusions

When the Israelites reach Canaan’s border, Moses sends twelve men to explore the land. All agree that the land is good, but ten fear its inhabitants and think Israel cannot overcome them.

“We cannot go up and attack those people, because they are stronger than we are.” — Numbers 13:31

Joshua and Caleb see things differently. They do not say there are no enemies. Rather, they trust that the God who led Israel out of Egypt will continue to lead

them.

“If the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us into that land and give it to us—a land flowing with milk and honey.” — Numbers 14:8

3. The Core Problem Is Not Fear, but Unbelief

The people are terrified after hearing the ten scouts’ report. They even want to return to Egypt, forgetting that they have witnessed the ten plagues, the crossing of the sea, and God’s provision throughout their journey.

“Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt!” — Numbers 14:4

The Bible understands this as unbelief toward God: even after seeing his actions, they still do not trust him to fulfill his promise.

As a result, the first adult generation to leave Egypt cannot immediately enter Canaan. They must wander in the wilderness until a new generation grows up.

The central reason for the forty wilderness years is Israel’s refusal to trust God at Canaan’s border.

4. Forty Years of Life in the Wilderness

The Israelites live in the wilderness for many years. This is not merely a journey that takes longer than expected. It is a time of repeatedly learning to trust God.

They often complain because of a lack of food or water, or anxiety about the future. God continues both to provide for them and to discipline them. Exodus has already described God giving them manna for food.

“The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they entered an inhabited land.” — Exodus 16:35

In the later Bible, therefore, “the wilderness” often calls to mind a place where people learn whether they are willing to trust God when resources are limited and they cannot control everything themselves.

5. Moses Does Not Enter Canaan Either

Moses is the key figure who led Israel out of Egypt, but the Bible does not portray him as incapable of mistakes. On one occasion, when the people quarrel over a lack of water, Moses does not act as God commands or honor God as holy before the people.

“Because you did not trust me or honor me as holy before the Israelites, you will not lead this community into the land I am giving them.” — Numbers 20:12

In the end, Moses can see the promised land only from a distance. He does not personally lead the people into it.

This again reminds readers that the Bible's major figures are not perfect heroes. The truly constant central figure in the story is the God who keeps his covenant and moves his promises forward.

6. Joshua Succeeds Moses

Before Moses dies, God appoints Joshua to carry on his work. Joshua is not a newcomer: he has long followed Moses and was one of the two scouts, out of the twelve, who believed God's promise.

"The LORD said to Moses, 'Joshua son of Nun is a man who has the Holy Spirit within him. Bring him here and lay your hand on his head.'" — Numbers 27:18

After Moses' death, God tells Joshua to lead the Israelites across the Jordan River.

"Now rise, cross this Jordan with all the people, and go into the land I am about to give to the Israelites." — Joshua 1:2

7. Entering the Promised Land

Joshua leads the Israelites across the Jordan and into Canaan. This is an important turning point in the biblical story: the promise of land, first given in Abraham's time, now begins to take concrete shape.

"That day, the LORD made Joshua great in the sight of all Israel. Throughout his lifetime, the people respected him as they had respected Moses." — Joshua 4:14

Joshua then records Israel's battles against the cities of Canaan, the acquisition of land, and the process of allotting territory to the tribes.

8. Jericho: A Story of More Than Military Strength

One of the best-known stories after entering Canaan is Jericho. Following God's instructions, the Israelites march around the city, and eventually its walls fall.

"The people shouted, and the priests blew their horns. When the people heard the horns, they gave a great shout, and the city wall collapsed." — Joshua 6:20

The story directs readers' attention not to Israel's exceptional skill in siege warfare, but to the fact that they can enter the land because God fulfills his promise.

9. What Is the “Promised Land”?

The “promised land” primarily means Canaan: the land God promised to Abraham’s descendants and in which the Israelites later lived. When reading the Bible, we may also encounter expressions such as “Canaan” or simply “the land.”

Beginners should avoid a common misunderstanding: Canaan in the Old Testament is not simply the equivalent of “heaven.” It is first a real territory, part of the land promise in God’s covenant with Abraham.

The promised land first means Canaan. Do not automatically read it as “going to heaven after death.”

10. Entering the Land Does Not Solve Every Problem

Although Israel enters Canaan, Joshua does not suggest that every part of the land immediately comes under complete control. The tribes still have to face inhabitants in different regions and learn to remain faithful to their covenant with God while living there.

In his old age, Joshua again reminds the people that they must decide whom they will serve.

“As for me and my household, we will certainly serve the LORD.” — Joshua 24:15

The real question, then, is never only “Have they received the land?” It is also: Will the people living in the promised land faithfully worship God?

11. Key Points from This Stage

- Canaan is the land God promised Abraham’s descendants as far back as Abraham’s own time.
- After twelve scouts explore Canaan, most are too afraid to enter. Joshua and Caleb choose to trust God.
- Because of unbelief, Israel wanders in the wilderness for forty years. Most of the first generation to leave Egypt do not enter Canaan.
- Moses also fails and does not enter the promised land. Joshua eventually succeeds him as leader.
- Joshua leads the Israelites across the Jordan, and they begin acquiring and allotting the land of Canaan.

- The “promised land” first refers to the real land of Canaan and should not be directly equated with heaven.
- Entering the land does not solve the problem of human unfaithfulness. Israel still has to choose whether to be faithful to God.

12. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

After Joshua dies, the Israelites are living in Canaan, but they have no king or stable, lasting central government. In the next era, the people will repeatedly turn away from God, suffer oppression by enemies, and cry out to him in their distress.

Again and again, God will raise up leaders to rescue them. The Bible calls these people “judges.”

Now that Israel lives in the promised land, will it become a people faithful to God?

Next stage: The Time of the Judges — No king, and everyone does as they please

08 | The Time of the Judges

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 08 of 16

No king, and everyone does as they please

Bible reading: Judges 2-3, 4, 6-8, 13-16, 21 (selected passages)

This stage answers three questions:

Who are the “judges”? Why does Israel keep repeating its failures? Why does the story eventually begin looking toward a king?

In the previous stage, we saw Israel enter Canaan under Joshua’s leadership and begin living in the land God promised Abraham’s descendants. Yet entering the promised land does not automatically remove humanity’s problems. After Joshua, Israel enters a period with no king ruling over the whole people. This is the setting of Judges.

1. A Biblical “Judge” Is Not a Modern Courtroom Judge

The title “judge” may suggest a courtroom official, but the judges in this book are more like leaders and deliverers whom God raises up in times of crisis. Sometimes they lead armies into battle; sometimes they govern the people, rescuing Israel from enemy oppression.

“The LORD raised up judges, and they rescued the people from those who plundered them.” — Judges 2:16

When reading Judges, then, we can begin by understanding a “judge” as someone God raises up in a particular crisis to lead and rescue the people.

2. Israel Begins Repeatedly Turning Away from God

After entering Canaan, Israel is surrounded by many other peoples, with different religions and forms of idol worship. The Israelites gradually come under their influence and begin worshiping other gods.

“The Israelites did what the LORD regarded as evil and served the Baals. They abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors who had brought them out of Egypt, and bowed down to other gods.” — Judges 2:11-12

This matters because God had already made a covenant with Israel at Sinai, and Israel had agreed to be his people. Now they turn to other gods again and again.

The problem is not simply that Israel cannot defeat its enemies. Its relationship with God keeps breaking down.

3. Judges Contains a Repeating Cycle

Although Judges features many people, its stories share a very similar basic pattern:

- The Israelites abandon God and worship other gods.
- Neighboring peoples oppress them.
- In their suffering, the people cry out to God.
- God raises up a judge to rescue them.
- There is peace for a time.
- After the judge dies, the people turn away from God again.

“But after a judge died, they turned back to evil, acting worse than their ancestors. They served and bowed down to other gods, never giving up their stubborn, evil ways.” — Judges 2:19

Judges, then, is not a collection of unrelated heroic stories. It shows readers a cycle that grows increasingly serious.

4. Deborah: God Also Rescues Israel through a Woman Judge

Deborah is one of the important judges in the book. While Israel is oppressed by a Canaanite king, she is both a prophet and a leader who decides cases for the people. She also encourages Barak to go into battle.

“A woman prophet named Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was serving as Israel’s judge at that time.” — Judges 4:4

This reminds readers that the position of judge is not an office always inherited within one particular family. God raises up different people at different times.

5. Gideon: Faith alongside Weakness

At first, Gideon is deeply afraid and doubts his ability to complete the task God has given him. Yet God uses him to defeat the Midianites.

“The LORD said to him, ‘I will be with you, and you will strike down the Midianites as though they were a single man.’” — Judges 6:16

Gideon's later story also shows that he is far from a flawless hero. Judges often deliberately draws attention to the considerable limitations of the people God uses.

6. Samson: Great Strength, but a Troubled Life

Samson may be the best-known judge. He has extraordinary strength and attacks the Philistines, but his temperament, romantic relationships, and choices are often highly impulsive.

This illustrates a distinctive feature of Judges: as the story proceeds, the judges' own problems seem to become increasingly obvious. Israel needs more than "another, stronger warrior."

The real problem lies not only with enemies outside, but also within human hearts.

7. The Time of the Judges Is Not a Story of Steady Progress

If we read only the exciting episodes involving Deborah, Gideon, and Samson, it is easy to treat Judges as a book of heroic adventures. Yet the book as a whole moves in the opposite direction: Israel's situation gradually deteriorates.

The later stories are filled with violence, disorder, and conflict between tribes. The author repeatedly impresses on readers that although this people has entered the promised land, it has still not truly learned to be faithful to God.

8. "There Was No King in Israel in Those Days"

"There was no king in Israel in those days; everyone acted as they pleased." — Judges 21:25

This is the final sentence of Judges, and a crucial one for understanding the whole book.

"Everyone acted as they pleased" is not praise for people's freedom. It describes disorder: each person lives according to what they think is right, and the whole people becomes increasingly chaotic.

The story naturally raises a question: Does Israel need a king who can provide lasting leadership?

9. But Can Having a King Really Solve the Problem?

Judges does indeed lead readers toward the kingdom period. Yet the later Bible will show that having a king does not make every problem disappear. A good king can lead the people well, but a bad king can lead an entire nation away from God.

From here onward, therefore, the Bible gradually raises a deeper question: What kind of king does Israel truly need?

10. Key Points from This Stage

- The judges are not modern courtroom judges, but leaders and deliverers raised up by God in times of crisis.
- After entering Canaan, Israel repeatedly comes under the influence of surrounding idol worship.
- Judges repeatedly presents a cycle: turning away from God → oppression → crying out → rescue → turning away again.
- Judges such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson are not flawless heroes.
- Israel's greatest problem comes not only from outside enemies, but also from its own repeated covenant-breaking.
- Judges ends by directing the story toward a question: What kind of king does Israel need?

11. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

During the time of the judges, there is no king over all Israel, and the tribes often live separately. Next, Samuel becomes an important figure, and the Israelites formally ask for a king.

The first king is Saul. Yet the person who will profoundly shape the rest of the Bible is the second king: David.

From the disorder of having “no king,” the story is about to enter the age of the kingdom.

Next stage: The Rise of the Kingdom — Saul, David, and God's promise to David

09 | The Establishment of the Kingdom

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 09 of 16

Saul, David, and God's promise to David

Bible readings: 1 Samuel 8–10, 15–17; 2 Samuel 5, 7, 11–12 (selected passages)

Three questions for this stage:

Why did Israel ask for a king? Why is David especially important? How is the hope for a Messiah connected with David?

In the previous stage, we saw the repeated observation at the end of Judges: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone acted as they pleased.” Israel had settled in the promised land, but its political and religious life remained in turmoil. The story now enters a new stage: Israel begins to have kings of its own.

1. Israel Asks for a King

When Samuel was old, the elders of Israel came to him and asked him to appoint a king to govern them. In particular, they wanted a king “like the other nations.”

“Now appoint a king to govern us, like the other nations.” — 1 Samuel 8:5

The issue was not simply whether monarchy itself was an acceptable institution. More importantly, Israel wanted to be like its neighbors and place its security and government in the hands of a human king.

“The LORD said to Samuel, ‘Listen to everything the people say to you. It is not you they have rejected; they have rejected me and do not want me to be their king.’” — 1 Samuel 8:7

Israel would have a king, but Scripture continued to remind the people that their true and highest king was God.

2. Saul Becomes Israel's First King

God directed Samuel to anoint Saul. Saul was tall and impressive; to the people, he looked like a king, and many supported him.

“No one among the people could compare with him; from his shoulders upward he stood a head taller than everyone else. Samuel said to all the people, ‘Look at the man the LORD has chosen. Is there anyone among all the people who can compare with him?’ Then all the people shouted, ‘Long live the king!’” — 1 Samuel 10:23–24

Saul's accession formally brought Israel into the age of kings. Yet looking the part did not mean he would faithfully obey God.

3. Saul's Failure: A King Must Still Obey God

Saul later failed repeatedly to follow God's commands. On one occasion, he kept plunder that should have been dealt with as commanded, explaining that it was intended "for sacrifice to God." Samuel rebuked him: religious ceremonies cannot take the place of obedience.

"Samuel said, 'Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in listening to his word? Obeying is better than sacrifice; heeding him is better than the fat of rams.'" — 1 Samuel 15:22

Saul's failure shows that Israel needed more than simply "a king." It needed someone willing to rule under God's authority.

4. David Is Anointed

After Saul was rejected, God sent Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint a new king from among Jesse's sons. Samuel too was initially drawn to outward appearances, but God reminded him not to judge people by how they looked.

"But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or his tall stature; I have not chosen him. The LORD does not see people as humans do: humans look at outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'" — 1 Samuel 16:7

"Samuel took the anointing oil in his horn and anointed him among his brothers. From that day onward, the Spirit of the LORD worked powerfully in David." — 1 Samuel 16:13

To "anoint" someone is to pour oil on that person, marking them as set apart for a particular office. A king could therefore be called an "anointed one." This expression would later become crucial background for understanding the word "Messiah."

5. David Gradually Becomes Israel's Leader

David did not begin as a man seated in a palace. He tended sheep and served at Saul's side. One of the best-known episodes in his life is his confrontation with the Philistine warrior Goliath.

"David said to the Philistine, 'You attack me relying on sword, spear, and javelin. I come against you relying on the name of the LORD of hosts, the God who leads Israel's armies, whom you have insulted.'" — 1 Samuel 17:45

The point is not that David himself was stronger than Goliath, but that David trusted God as Israel's true deliverer. Later, David's reputation grew; after Saul's death, he eventually became king over all Israel.

6. David Reigns, and Jerusalem Becomes the Royal City

David became king at thirty, ruling first over Judah and then over all Israel. He later captured Jerusalem and made it his capital, so Jerusalem also became known as the “City of David.”

“David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned for forty years.... David lived in the stronghold and named it the City of David.” — 2 Samuel 5:4, 9

From this point, “David,” “Jerusalem,” and “kingdom” form a crucial connection in the biblical story. Solomon would later build the temple in Jerusalem as well.

7. God Makes a Crucial Promise to David

David wanted to build a temple for God. Through the prophet Nathan, however, God told him that what mattered was not only the “house” David wanted to build for God, but the “house” God would establish for David—a continuing dynasty.

“When your lifetime is complete and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, and I will make his kingdom secure. He will build a house for my name, and I will establish his royal throne forever.” — 2 Samuel 7:12-13

“Your house and your kingdom will stand securely before me forever. Your throne too will be established forever.” — 2 Samuel 7:16

This is a foundational passage for what is often called the “Davidic covenant.” Within the immediate story, David's son Solomon would succeed him and build the temple. Yet the promise of an “everlasting throne” also led later Israelites to keep hoping that God would ultimately raise up a descendant of David who truly pleased him.

From then on, the “descendant of David” became a central focus of the Bible's hope for a king and Messiah.

8. What Do “Messiah” and “Christ” Mean?

“Messiah” originally means “anointed one.” Israel's kings were anointed and could therefore be called God's anointed ones. Later, as David's dynasty declined and foreign powers ruled the land, the hope that God would raise up a future descendant of David as king became increasingly important.

“Christ,” used in the New Testament, is the Greek expression for the same title. “Jesus Christ” is therefore not “Jesus” followed by a surname. It declares that Jesus is the “Christ,” or “Anointed One.”

Messiah = anointed one; Christ = the Greek expression for the same title.

9. David Was Not a Perfect King Either

The Bible does not portray David as faultless. He later sinned with Bathsheba and arranged for her husband Uriah to die in battle. The prophet Nathan confronted him directly, and David acknowledged that he had sinned against God.

“David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD!’ Nathan said, ‘The LORD has taken away your sin; you will not die.’” — 2 Samuel 12:13

David is enormously important, but he is not the final, perfect king of the biblical story. His own life shows that even Israel's most important king still needed God's forgiveness.

10. Key Points from This Stage

- After the time of the judges, Israel asked for a king like the other nations.
- Saul became the first king but lost his kingship through disobedience to God.
- Samuel anointed David, who later became king over all Israel and made Jerusalem his royal city.
- God promised David that his descendants and throne would have a special, enduring future.
- The “anointed one” became important background for understanding “Messiah” and “Christ.”
- Important as David was, he still sinned, so the story continued to await a more perfect king.

11. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

After David died, his son Solomon succeeded him as king. Solomon would build Jerusalem's temple, and Israel's kingdom would enter a prosperous period. But this did not bring the kingdom's problems to an end.

Solomon turned away from God in his later years. After his death, the nation divided into the northern kingdom of “Israel” and the southern kingdom of “Judah.” The biblical story would now enter a period of divided kingdoms and prophets repeatedly calling the people to return.

Next stage: Solomon, the temple, and the divided kingdom—why did one kingdom become two?

10 | Solomon, the Temple, and the Divided Kingdom

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 10 of 16

From the kingdom's height to northern Israel and southern Judah

Bible readings: 1 Kings 2-3, 6, 8, 11-12 (selected passages)

Three questions for this stage:

Why is Solomon important? What did the temple mean? Why did Israel split into two kingdoms?

In the previous stage, we saw David become a key king of Israel and receive God's promise that his dynasty would have a special, enduring future. After David died, his son Solomon succeeded him. Under Solomon, Israel prospered and Jerusalem's temple was built. Yet this same Solomon turned away from God in his later years. Eventually, after his death, the once-united kingdom split apart.

1. Solomon Succeeds David as King

Late in his life, David arranged for Solomon to succeed him. Solomon thus became the next king of David's dynasty.

“Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his kingdom became firmly established.” — 1 Kings 2:12

This matters because, as we saw in the previous stage, God had promised David that his offspring would succeed him. Solomon was the most immediate continuation of that promise.

2. Solomon Asks God for Wisdom

Early in Solomon's reign, God appeared to him in a dream and invited him to ask for what he needed. Rather than first requesting wealth or a long life, Solomon asked for wisdom to judge rightly among the people.

“Please give me wisdom to judge your people and distinguish right from wrong. Otherwise, who could judge this great multitude of people?” — 1 Kings 3:9

God was pleased with Solomon's request and granted him wisdom. This is why the Bible later so often connects Solomon with “wisdom.”

One of Solomon's best-known qualities is that he asked God for wisdom to govern the people.

3. Israel Enters a Period of Prosperity

During Solomon's reign, the state developed a more complete administrative system and undertook extensive building projects and international trade. Outwardly, this was a notably prosperous period for Israel's kingdom.

Prosperity, however, also brought massive construction projects, compulsory labor, and taxes. These burdens would later become a significant part of the background to the kingdom's division.

4. Solomon Builds the Temple in Jerusalem

In the wilderness, Israel's center of worship was the movable “tabernacle.” In Solomon's day, this worship center became a permanent building: the temple in Jerusalem.

“In the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, the second month, he began building the house of the LORD.” — 1 Kings 6:1

After the temple was completed, the ark of the covenant was placed inside it. For Israel, Jerusalem's temple became the center of worship, sacrifice, and major festivals.

“When the priests came out of the sanctuary, a cloud filled the house of the LORD. The priests could not remain standing to perform their duties, because the glory of the LORD filled the house.” — 1 Kings 8:10-11

From then on, “Jerusalem” and “the temple” became places of immense importance throughout the biblical story.

5. The Temple Does Not Confine God to a Building

Although the temple symbolized God's presence among his people, Solomon himself clearly understood that the Creator of heaven and earth could never truly be contained in a building.

“Will God really live on earth? Look—even heaven and the highest heavens cannot contain you, much less this house I have built!” — 1 Kings 8:27

The temple mattered, then, not because people had confined God inside it, but because God chose it as a central place for Israel to worship him.

This background remained crucial in Jesus' time. When we later read Mark, we need to understand Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, his entry into the temple, and his actions there in light of this history.

6. Solomon Turns Away from God in His Later Years

Though famous for wisdom, Solomon developed serious problems in his faith late in life. Scripture says that he married many foreign women and came under the influence of the gods they worshiped. The central issue was not their different ethnic backgrounds, but Solomon's resulting turn to other gods.

“When Solomon was old, his wives drew his heart after other gods. Unlike his father David, he was not wholeheartedly obedient to the LORD his God.” — 1 Kings 11:4

The contrast is striking: the king who once asked God for wisdom and built the temple ultimately turned away from God himself.

Wisdom, success, and religious accomplishments do not guarantee that a person will remain faithful to God.

7. God Announces That the Kingdom Will Divide

Because Solomon turned to other gods, God announced that his kingdom would be torn apart. Yet because of the promise to David, the kingdom would not be taken entirely from David's house.

“So the LORD said to him, ‘Because you have done this and have not kept my covenant and the statutes I commanded you to keep, I will take your kingdom away and give it to your servant.’” — 1 Kings 11:11

The coming division therefore had political causes as well as the spiritual causes that Scripture emphasizes.

8. Rehoboam's Decision Brings the Conflict to a Head

After Solomon died, his son Rehoboam succeeded him. The people asked him to lighten the heavy labor and burdens imposed during Solomon's reign.

“Your father placed a heavy yoke on us and made us work hard. Please ease the hard labor and heavy yoke we bear, and we will serve you.” — 1 Kings 12:4

Rehoboam rejected the older advisers' counsel to treat the people kindly and chose a harsher form of rule instead. This brought their existing resentment into the open.

9. One Kingdom Becomes Two

“When all Israel saw that the king would not listen to them, they said to him, ‘What share do we have in David? We have no connection with Jesse's son. People of Israel, go back to your own homes!’” — 1 Kings 12:16

The kingdom split. From here onward, when reading Kings and many prophetic books, we need to distinguish two different kingdoms:

Northern kingdom: Israel—initially ruled by Jeroboam, with most tribes in the north.
Southern kingdom: Judah—ruled by Rehoboam, centered on Jerusalem, and continuing David's dynasty.

The word “Israel” can therefore mean either the whole people of Israel or specifically the northern kingdom after the division. In later biblical readings, we must judge its meaning from the context.

10. The Northern Kingdom Establishes Its Own Worship Centers

Jeroboam, the northern kingdom's first king, faced a political problem: Jerusalem's temple was in southern Judah. If northern people kept traveling to Jerusalem to worship, he feared they would eventually return their allegiance to the southern king.

So Jeroboam established worship centers at Bethel and Dan and made golden calves.

“King Jeroboam made his plans and cast two golden calves. He said to the people, ‘People of Israel, going up to Jerusalem is too difficult for you. Here are your gods who brought you out of Egypt.’ He placed one calf at Bethel and the other at Dan. This led the people into sin.” — 1 Kings 12:28–30

From the perspective of Kings, this marked a major beginning of the northern kingdom's persistent religious unfaithfulness. Later northern kings are frequently compared with Jeroboam.

11. Why Does the Kingdom's Division Matter So Much?

From here on, Israel's history no longer follows just one royal line: northern Israel and southern Judah exist side by side. Each has its own kings and faces political, military, and spiritual crises. As kings and people turn away from God, another important group appears increasingly often: the prophets. They speak to kings and people on God's behalf, calling them back to their covenant with God.

12. Key Points from This Stage

- Solomon succeeded David, became famous for wisdom, and built the temple in Jerusalem.
- The temple was a vital worship center, but Solomon still turned to other gods in his later years.
- After Solomon's death, the kingdom split: the north was called “Israel” and the south “Judah.” Jerusalem and David's dynasty remained in the south.
- Jeroboam established separate worship centers in the north, a key starting point for its later religious problems.

13. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

After the division, many kings would arise in both north and south, and idolatry and injustice would persist. In this setting, God raised up Elijah, Elisha, and later prophets such as Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, who brought warnings and calls to kings and people alike.

Next stage: the divided kingdom and the prophets—when kings turn away from God, who speaks the truth?

11 | Prophets in the Divided Kingdom

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 11 of 16

When kings and people turn away from God, who speaks the truth?

Bible readings: 1 Kings 16–19, 21; Amos 5; Isaiah 1 (selected passages)

Three questions for this stage:

What do prophets do? Why do they so often rebuke kings? How do their messages relate to Israel's future?

In the previous stage, we saw that after Solomon's death, Israel's kingdom divided into northern “Israel” and southern “Judah.” Both had their own kings and faced political and spiritual crises. At this point another important group appears increasingly often in Scripture: the prophets.

1. A Prophet's Main Role Is Not “Predicting the Future”

Today, many people's first association with “prophet” is predicting the future. In the Bible, however, a prophet's more fundamental role is to speak to kings and people on God's behalf.

“The word of the LORD came to me: ‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I set you apart as holy. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.’” — Jeremiah 1:4–5

Prophets do speak about the future, but often because they are warning the people: continued unfaithfulness to God will bring judgment; if they turn back, God still calls them to return to him.

A prophet's basic task is to bring God's message to people in their own time, not merely to predict a distant future.

2. Prophets Remind the People of Their Covenant with God

Israel was not a people without a history. God had made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai and given them the law. The prophets therefore often reminded the people that they already knew how God required them to live.

When kings and people worshiped other gods, oppressed the vulnerable, or maintained religious ceremonies without truly following God's ways, the prophets exposed these failures.

3. King Ahab of the North and Baal Worship

Ahab was an important king in the northern kingdom's history. Scripture particularly notes that he and his wife Jezebel promoted Baal worship, worsening idolatry in the north.

“Ahab also made an Asherah. What he did provoked the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, more than all the kings of Israel before him.” — 1 Kings 16:33

The prophet Elijah appeared in this setting. He was not a king and had no army, yet he dared to deliver an unwelcome message directly to the king.

4. Elijah on Mount Carmel: Whom Will Israel Follow?

The encounter between Elijah and Baal's prophets on Mount Carmel is one of the most famous scenes in Kings. The real issue was not a spectacle, but whom the people of Israel would acknowledge as their God.

“Elijah came forward and said to all the people, ‘How long will you remain divided between two loyalties? If the LORD is God, follow the LORD; if Baal is God, follow Baal.’” — 1 Kings 18:21

At the story's end, God answered Elijah's altar with fire, and the people acknowledged that the LORD was God. The event brought Israel back to its most fundamental question: would they remain faithful to the God who had made a covenant with them, or turn to worship other gods?

5. Prophets Also Rebuke Social Injustice

The prophets were not concerned only with whether people worshiped idols. They cared equally about how the rich treated the poor, whether rulers abused their power, and whether society was marked by oppression and injustice.

King Ahab wanted the vineyard of a man named Naboth. When Naboth refused to sell it, Jezebel abused her power to arrange his death, and Ahab took his land. Elijah confronted Ahab directly over this.

“This is what the LORD says: ‘Have you murdered a man and also taken his property?’” — 1 Kings 21:19

This shows us that, in the prophets' message, worshiping God cannot be separated from how we treat other people.

6. Elisha Succeeds Elijah

After Elijah, Elisha continued his prophetic work. Second Kings records many events involving Elisha: helping a poor widow, healing the Aramean commander Naaman, and aiding people amid warfare.

“Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Before I am taken away from you, ask what you want me to do for you.’ Elisha replied, ‘May the spirit that moves you move me in double measure.’” — 2 Kings 2:9

Elijah and Elisha show that prophets are not simply people who stand in religious places and speak. They enter directly into the realities of kingship, war, poverty, and everyday life.

7. Later Prophets Left Writings

The deeds of Elijah and Elisha are recorded mainly in Kings. Later, the Bible also preserves many books named after prophets, including Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah.

These prophets lived at different times and faced different circumstances, but their messages often share several themes: turn away from idols, keep the covenant with God, practice justice, and heed the warning that persistent unfaithfulness will have grave consequences.

8. Amos: God Wants More Than Religious Ceremonies

During one prosperous period in the northern kingdom, society was nevertheless marked by stark inequality and oppression. The prophet Amos severely rebuked those who worshiped while also practicing injustice.

“Let fairness surge like great waters, and righteousness flow like a mighty river.” — Amos 5:24

This does not mean that sacrifice or worship has no value. Rather, if religious activities make no difference at all to how people treat others, that worship has lost the substance it should have.

In the prophetic message, faithfulness to God is expressed not only in worship but also in justice, mercy, and everyday living.

9. Hosea: Marriage as an Image of Israel's Unfaithfulness

The prophet Hosea uses a powerful marriage image to describe God's relationship with Israel: God remains faithful to his covenant, while Israel turns to other gods like an unfaithful spouse.

“Come, let us return to the LORD! He has torn us, but he will also heal us; he has wounded us, but he will also bind our wounds.” — Hosea 6:1

The prophets' warnings are therefore not simply declarations that “God is angry.” They are calls for the people to return within a covenant relationship that already exists.

10. Isaiah: Worship, Sin, and Future Hope

Isaiah, a prophet in southern Judah, likewise rebuked false worship and injustice. He pointed out that performing religious ceremonies while refusing to change one's life was not what God wanted.

“Wash yourselves and become clean. Remove your evil deeds from my sight. Stop doing evil; learn to do good. Seek fairness and rescue the oppressed.” — Isaiah 1:16-17

Yet the prophets' message was not only rebuke. Even amid judgment, they increasingly spoke of an important hope: God had not abandoned his plan and would still bring restoration in the future. This thread of hope becomes increasingly significant as the story continues.

11. Why Do Prophets So Often Clash with Kings?

Because kings do not determine the prophets' message. Their responsibility is not to make rulers comfortable, but to judge the conduct of kings and people according to God's requirements.

In Scripture, then, the true question is not “How powerful is the king?” but “Is the king faithful to God?” Even a king remains under God's covenant and law.

Kings may hold political power, but prophets remind everyone that Israel's true king is still God.

12. The Warnings Grow More Severe

As north and south persisted in turning away from God, the prophetic warnings grew more severe: if the people continued to break the covenant, the nation itself could face destruction. Eventually Assyria conquered the north, Babylon conquered the south, and many people were taken from their homes into exile.

13. Key Points from This Stage

- Prophets communicate God's message to the kings and people of their time, rather than merely predict the future.
- Prophets call Israel to remain faithful to its covenant with God, abandon idolatry, and value justice and mercy.
- Prophets such as Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah brought warnings and calls to the people in different periods.
- When the people persistently refused to return, the prophets warned of national judgment while also preserving hope for future restoration.

14. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

The prophets warned the people again and again, but neither north nor south fully turned back. Israel would now face its greatest national crisis since the exodus: the loss of land, kingdom, and temple.

Next stage: national collapse and exile—God's people lose their land, kingdom, and temple

12 | National Collapse, Exile, and the Hope of Restoration

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 12 of 16

Land, kingdom, and temple—all were lost

Bible readings: 2 Kings 17, 24–25; Jeremiah 29, 31; Ezekiel 36 (selected passages)

Three questions for this stage:

Why did Israel and Judah fall? What did exile mean? Had God's promises therefore failed?

In the previous stage, we saw the prophets repeatedly remind northern Israel and southern Judah not to leave God or use religious ceremonies to cover up idolatry and injustice. But the people and many kings persistently refused to turn back. At this stage, the judgment the prophets had warned of actually happened.

1. Northern Israel Falls to Assyria First

After the kingdom divided, northern Israel survived for about two hundred years. Around 722 BC, the powerful Assyrian Empire captured its capital, Samaria. The northern kingdom fell, and many inhabitants were resettled elsewhere.

“So the LORD became very angry with Israel and drove them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah remained.” — 2 Kings 17:18

Politically, this was a small nation conquered by a great empire. But Kings interprets the event spiritually: Israel had long been unfaithful to its covenant with God.

2. The Prophets Had Warned Them Repeatedly

“Through all the prophets and seers, the LORD warned Israel and Judah: ‘Turn from your evil ways. Keep my commandments and statutes, following the law I commanded your ancestors and delivered to you through my servants the prophets.’ But they would not listen.” — 2 Kings 17:13–14

In the biblical narrative, national collapse was therefore not a sudden change of mind on God's part, but the accumulated result of long-standing covenant-breaking.

The prophetic warnings were not empty words: Scripture understands national collapse as judgment after persistent unfaithfulness to God.

3. Southern Judah Remains for a Time

After the north fell, southern Judah continued to exist. Some kings during this period, such as Hezekiah and Josiah, sought religious reform, trying to remove idols and renew attention to God's law.

Yet reforms by individual kings did not completely transform the nation's long-accumulated problems. The prophets still warned Judah that if it continued to turn away from God, neither Jerusalem nor the temple could guarantee its permanent safety.

4. Babylon Becomes the New Great Power

Assyria later declined, and the Babylonian Empire rose. Babylon's king Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah repeatedly. Jerusalem was besieged on successive occasions, and many royal family members, officials, craftspeople, and ordinary people were taken to Babylon.

Zedekiah, Judah's last king, rebelled against Babylon. Around 586 BC, Jerusalem was breached, and Judah's kingdom came to an end.

5. Jerusalem and the Temple Are Destroyed

“He burned the house of the LORD and the royal palace, and he burned Jerusalem's houses, including the homes of the great families. The entire Chaldean army under the captain of the guard tore down the walls around Jerusalem.” — 2 Kings 25:9-10

This was a devastating shock for the people of Judah. Jerusalem was the center of David's dynasty, and the temple was a vital place for worshiping God. Now kingdom, walls, and temple were lost almost together.

6. What Exactly Is “Exile”?

After conquering a country, ancient empires often relocated some of its inhabitants to other regions of the empire to weaken resistance. The people of Judah being taken to Babylon is what Scripture calls “exile.”

Not everyone was taken away, nor did the entire people disappear. But the exiles left their homes, lived under foreign rule, and lost their former kingdom and temple.

Exile was not merely “moving to another country.” It was a profound disruption of a whole people's political life, relationship to the land, and religious life.

7. The Great Question: Had God's Promises Failed?

God had given land to Abraham's descendants and had made a promise concerning David's dynasty. Now foreigners controlled the land, David's descendants no longer reigned, and the temple had been destroyed. For people at the time, this naturally raised a painful question: had God's promises failed?

The prophets' answer was not that Babylon's gods were stronger than God. Rather, this disaster was the very judgment God had previously warned of; at the same time, God had not abandoned his people.

8. Life Must Continue in a Foreign Land

The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to those exiled to Babylon. Some may have expected to return home quickly, but Jeremiah told them to settle into life there and seek the well-being of their city.

“Seek peace for the city to which I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD for it. When that city has peace, you too will share in its peace.” — Jeremiah 29:7

This means that even away from Jerusalem, God remained in relationship with his people. Faith had not simply ceased because land and temple were lost.

9. Ezekiel: God Will Change the Human Heart

The prophet Ezekiel himself lived among the exiles. His message exposed the people's sin while also speaking of future restoration, with a focus on the human heart.

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh.” — Ezekiel 36:26

This is a crucial turning point. The problem was not simply the need to replace a king or rebuild a city; people's hearts themselves needed renewal.

10. Jeremiah Speaks of a “New Covenant”

“The LORD says, ‘Days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.’” — Jeremiah 31:31

We have already encountered the covenant at Sinai. Now, against the background of national failure and exile, the prophets begin to speak of a deeper renewal God will bring in the future.

National collapse and exile are not the end of the biblical story. Instead, they make the question of how God will truly restore his people all the more urgent.

11. The Promise to King David Still Raises a Question

God had promised David that his throne and descendants would have a special place in the plan of redemption. After the nation's fall, however, David's dynasty lost its actual ruling power.

Later Jews therefore increasingly wondered whether God would one day raise up a king who truly pleased him. This expectation gradually became linked with the hope for the “Messiah.”

12. Exile Raises Three Important Questions

From this point onward, keep three questions in mind as you read the rest of the Bible:

- Land: when will God's people be able to return to their own land?
- Temple: can Jerusalem and its center of worship be rebuilt?
- King: how will the promise to David's dynasty continue?

None of these questions received a quick and complete answer in later Jewish history. They would continue to shape expectations of God's salvation even in Jesus' time.

13. Key Points from This Stage

- Around 722 BC, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel.
- Southern Judah also persisted in turning away from God and was eventually conquered by Babylon.
- Around 586 BC, Jerusalem and the First Temple were destroyed, and Judah's kingdom fell.
- Many people of Judah were relocated to Babylon, beginning the period of “exile.”
- The prophets identified national collapse as the result of persistent covenant-breaking, while affirming that God had not abandoned his people.
- The prophets began to speak more clearly of a new heart, a new covenant, restoration, and the hope of God's renewed rule over his people.

14. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

After Judah fell, the people lived in Babylon for decades. But Babylon was not the last empire. Persia later rose, and its new rulers allowed exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem.

At last they could go home and rebuild the temple. Yet another question immediately arose: did returning to the land mean that the “restoration” God had promised was now fully accomplished?

Next stage: the return and the Second Temple—back in Jerusalem, but is true restoration complete?

13 | The Return and the Second Temple

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 13 of 16

Back in Jerusalem—is true restoration complete?

Bible readings: Ezra 1, 3, 6-7; Nehemiah 1-2, 8; Haggai 1-2 (selected passages)

Three questions for this stage:

Who allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem? What is the Second Temple? Why were they still awaiting fuller restoration after returning?

In the previous stage, we saw Babylon capture Jerusalem, destroy the First Temple, and take many people of Judah to Babylon. Land, kingdom, and temple were all lost. Yet another empire later replaced Babylon, bringing the biblical story into a new stage.

1. Persia Conquers Babylon

In 539 BC, the Persian Empire conquered Babylon. Its approach to government differed from Babylon's: Persia was more willing to let displaced peoples return home and resume their traditional religious life.

For the exiles from Judah, this brought an unexpected turning point: they had a chance to return to Jerusalem.

2. Cyrus of Persia Allows the People to Return

“Cyrus king of Persia says: ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the world and instructed me to build him a house in Jerusalem in Judah. Whoever among you belongs to his people may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel, in Jerusalem.... May God be with that person.’” — Ezra 1:2-3

Ezra records Cyrus's decree allowing the exiles to return and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. A story that seemed to have ended decades earlier was beginning again.

The “return” first meant God's people coming back to the promised land and restoring worship in Jerusalem.

3. Not Everyone Returned Together

Those taken to Babylon had lived there for decades, and some family members had even been born abroad. The return was therefore not a single mass move to Jerusalem on one day, but a gradual process involving different groups at different times.

Some Jews chose to remain in various parts of the Persian Empire, while others returned to Judah. From then on, Jewish life in the homeland and in communities abroad would coexist for a long time.

4. Zerubbabel Leads the Rebuilding of the Temple

Zerubbabel became a key leader among an early group of returnees. He was a descendant of David's royal house, but he did not become an independent king of Judah. He led the people under Persian imperial rule.

The returnees first resumed sacrifices and later began rebuilding the temple. Opposition and discouragement interrupted the work, while the prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the people to keep building.

“While this house remains desolate, are you yourselves still living in paneled houses?” — Haggai 1:4

The prophets reminded the people that after returning to the land, they could not simply busy themselves with their own lives. They also needed to put God back at the center of the community's life.

5. The Second Temple Is Completed

“The house was completed on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of King Darius. The people of Israel—the priests, the Levites, and the rest of those who had returned from exile—joyfully celebrated the dedication of God's house.” — Ezra 6:15–16

This rebuilt temple is usually called the “Second Temple,” distinguishing it from the First Temple built by Solomon and later destroyed by Babylon.

From this point, Jerusalem's temple again became a vital center of Jewish religious life. The temple seen in Jesus' time stood within this Second Temple tradition, following major expansion.

First Temple: built by Solomon and later destroyed by Babylon. Second Temple: rebuilt after the return from exile and continuing into Jesus' time.

6. They Returned, but David's Kingdom Was Not Restored

This distinction matters greatly. The people returned to the land and rebuilt the temple, but Judah did not again become an independent kingdom ruled by a descendant of David.

They remained subjects of the Persian Empire. The earlier hopes for David's dynasty, God's kingdom, and complete restoration were therefore not all fulfilled by the return.

7. Ezra: Teaching God's Law Again

Ezra came to Jerusalem in a later return. He was a priest and an expert in the law. His central task was not to build an army or kingdom, but to teach the people to understand God's law again.

“Ezra resolved to study and practice the law of the LORD, and to teach its statutes and judgments to the people of Israel.” — Ezra 7:10

National collapse and exile prompted deep Jewish reflection: why had the previous generation lost the land? The returning community therefore placed greater emphasis on the law, worship, and its identity as a people.

8. Nehemiah: Rebuilding Jerusalem's Walls

Later, Nehemiah was deeply distressed to hear that Jerusalem's walls still lay in ruins. With the Persian king's permission, he returned to Jerusalem to oversee their rebuilding.

“Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies desolate, and its gates have been burned. Come, let us rebuild Jerusalem's walls so that we will no longer suffer disgrace!’” — Nehemiah 2:17

Repairing the walls made Jerusalem a more fully functioning city again and symbolized the returning community's work of rebuilding its life.

9. The People Listen to the Law Again

“They read clearly from the book of God's law and explained its meaning, so the people could understand what was read.” — Nehemiah 8:8

This scene is important: people gather, listen to Scripture, and hear its contents explained so that everyone can understand. Reading, teaching, and interpreting Scripture would become increasingly central to Jewish faith.

After exile, Jewish religious life no longer centered only on “we have land and a king.” It also placed increasing emphasis on law, community, and worship.

10. Why Does the Name “Jews” Now Appear So Often?

The name “Jews” is related to “Judah.” The northern kingdom of Israel had long since fallen, and the biblical story of exile and return focuses mainly on the people of southern Judah. As history unfolded, “Jews” gradually became a common name for this people.

By New Testament times, therefore, we usually read about “Jews,” rather than an existing southern kingdom of Judah.

11. Was True Restoration Complete?

Judged only by external circumstances, the return seems to have accomplished much: the people came back to the land, the temple was rebuilt, Jerusalem's walls were repaired, and the law received renewed attention.

Yet several things remained unrestored: David's dynasty did not return to power, the Jews were still ruled by a foreign empire, and the complete renewal described by the prophets had not fully arrived.

The exile had ended, but hope for God to restore his people completely had not.

12. Key Points from This Stage

- After Persia conquered Babylon, Cyrus allowed exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem.
- The return took place in groups, and many Jews continued living abroad.
- Zerubbabel and others led the temple's rebuilding, producing what came to be called the “Second Temple.”
- Ezra emphasized studying and teaching the law; Nehemiah led the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.
- Although the people returned to the land, they remained under Persian rule, and David's kingdom was not truly restored.
- Jews therefore continued to hope for God's fuller future salvation and rule.

13. Where Does the Biblical Story Go Next?

At this point in Old Testament history, Jews were living in Jerusalem and Judah once again. Yet over the following centuries, the empires ruling this land would change repeatedly.

After Persia, Greek culture entered the Jewish world. The Maccabean revolt and Hasmonean dynasty followed, and Rome eventually became the new ruler. During these centuries, the Jewish society of Jesus' time gradually took shape.

Next stage: between the Testaments—from the Hellenistic world to Roman rule

14 | The Jewish World under Hellenistic and Roman Rule

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 14 of 16

From the Hellenistic world to Roman rule

Historical scope: the later Persian period to Roman rule in Judea (approximately the fourth to first centuries BC)

Three questions for this stage:

How did Greek culture enter the Jewish world? Why is the Maccabean revolt important? Why had Judea already fallen under Roman power before Jesus was born?

In the previous stage, we saw Jews return from exile and rebuild Jerusalem and the Second Temple, but David's kingdom was not restored. They still lived under foreign imperial rule. Over the following centuries, control of Judea changed repeatedly, gradually creating the political, cultural, and religious setting of Jesus' time.

1. What Does “Between the Testaments” Mean?

Christians often call the period from the later composition of Old Testament books to the beginning of New Testament times the “intertestamental period,” or “between the Testaments.” This is simply a convenient label. It does not mean these centuries left no historical records or that Jewish religious life stopped.

On the contrary, many important changes occurred. Without this background, readers turning straight to the New Testament find that Pharisees, Sadducees, synagogues, the Herodian family, and Romans all seem to appear out of nowhere.

“Between the Testaments” was not an empty gap, but the centuries during which the Jewish world of Jesus' time gradually took shape.

2. Alexander the Great Brings the Hellenistic World

In the fourth century BC, Alexander the Great of Macedonia rapidly conquered the Persian Empire and vast areas of the Near East. Judea thus passed from Persian rule into the Greek world's sphere of influence.

Alexander's conquests changed not only political boundaries but also spread the Greek language and culture widely. This cultural diffusion is usually called “Hellenization.”

3. What Is Hellenization?

Hellenization did not mean everyone abandoned their own people and religion. Rather, Greek language, education, urban culture, philosophy, art, and ways of life gradually became shared features of the contemporary world.

Many Jews remained faithful to their religion while living in a Greek-speaking environment. The New Testament's later composition in Greek is directly related to this historical setting.

By Jesus' time, Greek had become a major common language of the eastern Mediterranean world.

4. After Alexander's Death, His Empire Is Divided

After Alexander the Great died, no single stable successor took over his entire vast empire. Instead, his generals fought for control, eventually establishing several major kingdoms.

Situated between Egypt and Syria, Judea was long affected by two Hellenistic dynasties: the Ptolemies to the south and the Seleucids to the north. Its rulers changed between these two powers.

5. Antiochus IV and Religious Oppression

In the second century BC, the Seleucid king Antiochus IV imposed harsh measures on Jewish religious life. He sought more thorough Hellenization and interfered with traditional Jewish worship.

Under his rule, some Jewish legal practices were prohibited, and Jerusalem's temple was desecrated. For many Jews, this was no longer merely political domination but a direct threat to their faithfulness to God.

Foreign rule was now forcing Jews to abandon their own law and worship with unprecedented directness, and resistance broke out.

6. The Maccabean Revolt Begins

Around 167 BC, a Jewish priest named Mattathias refused the royal command to take part in pagan sacrifice and began a revolt with his family. His son Judas Maccabeus later became a leading figure.

“Maccabeus” was originally a title associated with Judas. “Maccabean” later came to describe the resistance movement and the related family.

The revolt did not initially aim to establish a new world empire, but to defend Jewish faith, law, and temple worship.

7. The Temple Is Cleansed Again

Maccabean forces later regained control of Jerusalem and cleansed and rededicated the temple around 164 BC. The Jewish Feast of Dedication, commonly known today as Hanukkah, commemorates this event.

This history made “faithfulness to God and refusal of foreign religious oppression” a deeply rooted collective memory for later Jews.

8. The Hasmonean Dynasty: A Period of Jewish Self-Rule

After the revolt succeeded, the Maccabean family gradually established the Hasmonean dynasty. For a substantial period, Judea gained greater autonomy and even became a state governed by Jewish rulers.

For Jews who had experienced centuries of foreign rule, this was a major turning point: once again they could see the possibility of their land being governed by their own people.

The Hasmonean dynasty, however, was not a restoration of David's dynasty. It also developed internal power struggles and political conflicts. Expectations for a king and kingdom truly pleasing to God therefore persisted.

9. Different Jewish Groups Gradually Emerge

Amid these centuries of political and religious conflict, different religious outlooks gradually emerged within Jewish society. Some stressed strict observance of law and tradition, others maintained close ties to temple priests and political power, and still others chose to withdraw from mainstream society.

Groups familiar from the New Testament, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees, developed gradually through these historical changes in the Second Temple period. Their differences will be introduced separately before we begin reading Mark itself.

10. Jews Also Live in Many Other Places

Not all Jews returned to Judah after exile. By the Hellenistic period, Jewish communities were scattered across Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and many other places. This scattered life is commonly called the “Diaspora,” or life away from the homeland.

Many Diaspora Jews primarily spoke Greek, so important Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures gradually emerged. This allowed Jewish faith to be read and shared throughout the Greek-speaking world.

The Greek language, Diaspora Jews, and Greek Scriptures all provided important background for the New Testament's later rapid spread.

11. Rome Enters Judea

Internal power struggles arose late in the Hasmonean dynasty. In 63 BC, the Roman general Pompey entered Jerusalem, bringing Judea under Roman power.

Jews retained some religious and local autonomy, but Rome now held ultimate political authority. This is the historical origin of Roman imperial rule over Judea at the opening of the New Testament.

12. Herod the Great and Judea before Jesus' Birth

Later, Herod the Great ruled Judea with Roman support. He was not the hoped-for messianic king of David's house, but a ruler who gained his position through Roman political power.

Herod greatly expanded Jerusalem's Second Temple, making it a magnificent building. The Jerusalem temple people saw in Jesus' time was this extensively enlarged Second Temple.

13. Why Does This History Matter for Reading the New Testament?

Before Jesus was born, Jews had experienced Persian rule, Hellenistic dynasties, a brief period of Hasmonean autonomy, and finally Roman domination. This intensified many people's hope that God would intervene in history and restore his people and kingdom.

Yet Jews did not agree completely on how God would save them. Some hoped for a king like David, some placed greater emphasis on law and holiness, and others expected God himself to bring judgment and renewal in the last days.

When Mark announces that “the kingdom of God is near,” those words are heard against centuries of foreign rule and enduring hope.

14. Key Points from This Stage

- Alexander the Great's conquests brought the Greek language and culture widely into the Jewish world.
- Antiochus IV's religious oppression prompted the Maccabean revolt; the temple was later cleansed and rededicated.

- The Maccabean family established the Hasmonean dynasty, giving Judea greater autonomy for a time.
- The different Jewish religious groups familiar from the New Testament gradually formed during the Second Temple period.
- Rome entered Jerusalem in 63 BC; later, Herod the Great ruled with Roman support and expanded the Second Temple.

15. Where Do We Go Next?

The stage for Jesus' time is almost ready: Judea is under Roman rule, the Second Temple remains the center of worship, Greek is widely used, and different religious and political groups coexist in Jewish society. Next we consider what people were waiting for: what are the “Messiah” and the “kingdom of God”? Why did people have different expectations of salvation?

Next stage: on the eve of Jesus' appearance—the Messiah, God's kingdom, and Jewish hopes

15 | The Messiah, the Kingdom of God, and Hope for the Last Days

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 15 of 16

The Messiah, God's kingdom, and Jewish hopes

Bible readings: 2 Samuel 7:12–16; Isaiah 9:6–7, 11:1–5; Daniel 7:13–14, 12:2–3 (selected passages)

Three questions for this stage:

What is the “Messiah”? What is the “kingdom of God”? What exactly were Jews waiting for before Jesus appeared?

In the previous stage, we saw Judea finally fall under Roman power. Around the time of Jesus' birth, Jews had experienced centuries of foreign rule. The temple still stood and the law was still observed, but David's dynasty had not been restored, and real political sovereignty was not in Jewish hands.

Many people therefore pondered a question: when would God's promises to Abraham, David, and the prophets finally be fulfilled completely?

1. Do Not Assume All Jews Expected the Same Thing

Jews in Jesus' time did not share only one outlook. Some hoped for political liberation, some emphasized law and holiness, some anticipated final judgment and resurrection, and others believed God would personally intervene in history.

“All Jews were waiting for a military Messiah” is therefore an oversimplification. More accurately, there were diverse expectations about salvation, the kingdom, and an anointed one, all connected with Old Testament promises.

Before Jesus appeared, Jewish hopes were diverse; there was no single fixed picture of the “Messiah.”

2. What Exactly Does “Messiah” Mean?

“Messiah” comes from Hebrew and basically means “anointed one.” In the Old Testament, kings, priests, and others could be anointed and set apart for a special office.

Later, “the anointed one who is to come” gradually became an important focus of hope. The Greek translation of “anointed one” is *Christos*, from which we get “Christ.”

“Christ” is not Jesus' surname. “Jesus Christ” means that Jesus is the Anointed One—the Messiah.

3. Why Is the Messiah So Often Connected with David?

Because God made a crucial promise to David: his throne and descendants would have a special place in God's plan.

“When your lifetime is complete and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, and I will make his kingdom secure. He will build a house for my name, and I will establish his royal throne forever.” — 2 Samuel 7:12-13

When David's dynasty later lost power, this promise was not forgotten. Hope for an ideal king gradually appeared in the prophetic books.

4. The Prophets Describe an Ideal King

“A child is born for us; a son is given to us. Authority will rest on his shoulders.... His authority and peace will increase without end. He will rule his kingdom on David's throne, establishing it securely with fairness and righteousness from now and forever.” — Isaiah 9:6-7

Passages like this led later Jewish readers to cherish the hope that a king truly pleasing to God would arise again from David's house.

“A shoot will spring from Jesse's stump, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and strength, of knowledge and reverence for the LORD.” — Isaiah 11:1-2

Jesse was David's father, so the shoot springing from Jesse's stump uses the image of a new branch to describe David's house rising again.

5. The “Kingdom of God” Is Not the Name of an Ordinary Country

When we hear “kingdom” today, we may readily think of territory, borders, government, and armies. But at its heart, the biblical “kingdom of God” means, first of all, God's kingship and rule.

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the one who brings good news, proclaims peace, announces glad tidings and salvation, and says to Zion, ‘Your God is reigning!’” — Isaiah 52:7

The arrival of God's kingdom therefore does not merely mean a new state appearing on the map. It means God displaying his rule, salvation, and justice as king.

We can begin by understanding the kingdom's heart this way: God reigns, and his rule is made visible.

6. Why Did Roman Rule Intensify This Hope?

If God was Israel's true king, yet Judea was actually controlled by Rome, a strong tension arose. Taxes, foreign armies, and Rome-appointed rulers constantly reminded people that they still lived under foreign power.

That does not mean everyone advocated armed revolution. Some may have expected political liberation, while others considered repentance, faithfulness to the law, and waiting for God's own action more important.

7. Why Is the “Son of Man” Also Important?

Alongside hope for a royal descendant of David, Daniel contains another image that later became crucial: someone “like a son of man” comes before God and receives a kingdom and authority.

“In my vision at night I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He was brought before the Ancient of Days and received authority, glory, and a kingdom, so that people of every region, nation, and ethnic group would serve him.” — Daniel 7:13–14

In ordinary language, “son of man” can mean a human being. But the vision in Daniel 7 also gives this expression a background of kingdom, authority, and hope for the last days.

When you later read Mark, you will notice that Jesus frequently calls himself the “Son of Man.” Remembering this background will show that the expression means more than simply “I am human.”

8. Hopes for Resurrection and Final Judgment Also Develop

In later Old Testament passages, hope for the resurrection of the dead and final judgment becomes clearer.

“Many who sleep in the dust will awaken: some to eternal life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. The wise will shine like the light of the heavens, and those who lead many into righteousness will shine like stars forever and ever.” — Daniel 12:2–3

By New Testament times, the belief that God would ultimately raise the dead and carry out judgment was therefore deeply important to some Jews. Different groups still disagreed about resurrection, however, and we will encounter these debates when reading Mark.

9. The Prophets Also Hope for Deeper Renewal

The restoration the prophets expected was not merely the political return of a king. Israel's long history had already demonstrated that even with land, law, temple, and kings, human hearts could still turn away from God.

The prophets therefore also spoke about forgiveness of sins, renewal of the heart, and a deeper relationship between God and his people. True salvation must address people's inner condition, not merely replace one political government with another.

Biblical hopes gradually converge on a larger question: who can truly bring God's kingdom, forgiveness, and renewal?

10. So What Were People Waiting For?

On the eve of Jesus' appearance, we can consider several major strands of hope together:

- A descendant of David: God had promised David a throne, so some awaited a king who truly pleased God.
- The kingdom of God: people hoped God would truly display his royal authority, save his people, and establish justice.
- Israel's restoration: prolonged foreign domination made “When will God restore his people?” a crucial question.
- Forgiveness and human renewal: the prophets showed that the problem lay not only in foreign governments; people themselves also needed to change.
- Resurrection and final judgment: some Jews expected God ultimately to defeat death and judge the world justly.

11. Do Not Turn These Hopes into a Fixed “Messiah Specification”

These passages and hopes are related, but people at the time did not have a universally agreed “Messiah's task list.” Some emphasized Davidic kingship, some final judgment, some temple and priesthood, while others primarily awaited God's own intervention.

This helps explain the very different responses when Jesus appeared: some believed he was the one they had awaited, some were puzzled, some disappointed, and others fiercely opposed him.

12. Now We Can Begin to Understand Mark's Opening

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” — Mark 1:1

Without background, a reader might hear only a religious phrase. But by now, we know that “Christ” means “Messiah” or “Anointed One,” linked with the Davidic covenant and a long history of hope.

“The appointed time has arrived, and the kingdom of God is near. Turn back to God and trust the good news!” — Mark 1:15

This is no longer simply “Please believe in religion.” It announces that the long-awaited rule of God is now drawing near in a decisive way.

From the outset, Mark raises two central questions: who exactly is Jesus, and how exactly will God's kingdom arrive?

13. Key Points from This Stage

- “Messiah” means “anointed one”; “Christ” is the Greek expression for the same title.
- The Davidic covenant made the “descendant of David” a vital background to later messianic hope.
- The “kingdom of God” refers first to God's kingship and rule, not merely a country on a map.
- Daniel's “son of man” and hope for resurrection also became important New Testament background.
- Jews in Jesus' time did not share a completely uniform picture of salvation or the Messiah.

14. Connecting the Threads

At this point, a simple sequence can help us remember how these hopes converge on the New Testament:

The Davidic covenant → hope for an ideal king → God reigning → the Son of Man and the kingdom → resurrection and renewal → Mark's announcement that “the kingdom of God is near”

15. Where Do We Go Next?

The historical background and major hopes are now in place. Before reading Mark itself, we need one final “reading toolkit”: who or what are the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, priests, synagogues, Sabbath, purity and impurity, tax collectors, and Gentiles?

Next stage: preparing to read Mark—people, groups, institutions, and key terms

16 | First-Century Jewish Society and Key Terms in Mark

Preparing to Read Mark · Unit 16 of 16

Meet the people, groups, institutions, and key terms you will encounter

Bible readings: Mark 1–3, 5, 7, 11–12, 14–15 (selected passages)

Three questions for this stage:

Who are the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes? How do the temple, synagogue, and Sanhedrin differ? Why do the Sabbath, purity, and tax collectors become controversial?

The previous fifteen stages have brought the history to Jesus' time. Before beginning Mark itself, we need a simple “reading toolkit,” because the Gospel introduces many groups and institutions familiar to first-century Jews but not necessarily to modern readers.

Remember one principle first: do not treat all religious leaders as one group, and do not reduce “Pharisee” to “bad person.” Different groups had different backgrounds, positions, and concerns.

1. Pharisees: A Religious Group Emphasizing Law and Tradition

The Pharisees were one of the important Jewish religious groups of the time. They valued the law of Moses and their ancestors' interpretations and practices, paying particular attention to how daily matters such as Sabbath, food, and purity could meet God's requirements.

The Pharisees were not the priestly class, nor can they simply be equated with “hypocrites.” In Mark, Jesus debates with them repeatedly, often over the central question of how God's law should truly be understood and practiced.

“The Pharisees and the Jews all hold to the traditions of the elders and do not eat without carefully washing their hands. After returning from the marketplace, they do not eat without washing. There are also many other inherited rules they observe, including washing cups, jars, and bronze vessels.”
— Mark 7:3–4

When you read about Pharisees, do not begin with “bad people.” Think first of people who took law and religious tradition very seriously.

2. Scribes: Specialists in Studying and Interpreting the Law

“Scribe” is more a professional identity than a separate sect. Scribes knew Scripture and the law, with responsibilities in copying, studying, teaching, and interpreting them.

Some scribes may have been close to Pharisaic traditions, so “scribes and Pharisees” often appear together in the Gospels. The terms are not synonyms, however.

“The people were astonished at his teaching, because he taught them as someone with authority, unlike the scribes.” — Mark 1:22

3. Sadducees: Close to the Temple and Elite Power

The Sadducees were another Jewish group, more closely associated with Jerusalem's temple, the priestly class, and upper society. They differed from the Pharisees on several important beliefs.

Mark explicitly notes that they did not accept the resurrection of the dead. This explains why they challenge Jesus with a question about marriage and resurrection.

“The Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came and questioned Jesus...” — Mark 12:18

Pharisees and Sadducees were not the same party; important disagreements already existed between them.

4. Priests, Chief Priests, and the High Priest

Priests mainly carried out temple sacrifices and ceremonies. Chief priests were priestly leaders with greater status and power, while the high priest held the highest office in the priestly system.

In the latter half of Mark, when Jesus enters Jerusalem and takes forceful action concerning the temple, the chief priests therefore become major figures in the story.

“When the chief priests and scribes heard this, they looked for a way to destroy Jesus. Yet they feared him, because all the people were astonished at his teaching.” — Mark 11:18

5. Temple, Synagogue, and Sanhedrin Are Not the Same

These three terms are easily confused when reading the Gospels. A simple distinction helps:

- Temple: located in Jerusalem, the center of sacrifice and worship at major festivals.
- Synagogue: found in many localities, a place where Jews gathered to read Scripture, pray, and receive teaching.
- Sanhedrin: an important Jewish council operating in Jerusalem and handling religious and judicial affairs.

“They came to Capernaum, and on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught the people.” — Mark 1:21

“The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin sought testimony against Jesus so they could put him to death, but they could find none.” — Mark 14:55

The temple was the center of worship and sacrifice; synagogues were local gathering and Scripture-reading places; the Sanhedrin was a council.

6. Why Does the Sabbath Matter So Much?

The Sabbath comes from the law of Moses and is a key marker of Israel's covenant life with God. By Jesus' time, detailed discussions and rules had developed about what could and could not be done on the Sabbath.

When Jesus heals on the Sabbath or his disciples pluck heads of grain on that day, these are not merely small everyday matters. They directly touch the major question of how to understand God's law.

“He also said to them, ‘The Sabbath was established for people, not people for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is also lord of the Sabbath.’” — Mark 2:27-28

7. “Clean/Unclean” Does Not Simply Mean “Hygienic/Dirty”

“Clean” and “unclean” in the law of Moses are first of all ritual states. They should not be read simply as judgments about hygiene, nor do they necessarily indicate moral wrongdoing. Food, disease, bodily conditions, and contact with certain things could all involve purity regulations.

For example, the woman with the flow of blood in Mark 5 was not only someone who had been ill for years. Against the background of the law, her prolonged bleeding

also placed her in an unclean state, giving the story religious and social weight as well.

“There was a woman who had suffered a flow of blood for twelve years. She had endured much under many doctors and spent everything she owned, yet she grew no better; instead, her condition worsened.” — Mark 5:25–26

“Unclean” does not mean “this person is more wicked.” It is first a ritual classification within the law.

8. An “Unclean Spirit” Is Not the Same as Ritual Impurity

“Unclean spirits” appear repeatedly from Mark's opening chapters. These are evil spirits opposed to God, not descriptions of someone who is merely ritually unclean because of food, illness, or a bodily condition. Do not confuse the two concepts.

“In the synagogue was a man possessed by an unclean spirit. He shouted, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, what have we to do with you? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: God's Holy One.’” — Mark 1:23–24

9. Why Are Tax Collectors So Often Grouped with “Sinners”?

Tax collectors collected revenue for the ruling authorities and were therefore often despised in Jewish society. They could readily be viewed as collaborators with foreign power and commonly bore a negative reputation for corruption and injustice.

In the Gospels, “sinners” sometimes means not only people guilty of grave wrongdoing, but also those whom the religious society of the day regarded as failing to observe the law or live up to religious standards.

“When scribes belonging to the Pharisees saw Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, ‘Does he eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’ Jesus heard them and replied, ‘Healthy people do not need a doctor; sick people do. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.’” — Mark 2:16–17

10. Who Are the Gentiles?

“Gentiles” most simply means people who are not Jewish. Israel was the covenant people, so clear boundaries separated Jews and Gentiles in religious identity, food, and social relations.

Yet Mark depicts Jesus' ministry crossing those boundaries. When you encounter Gentile regions or people, notice how the story broadens its focus from Israel to the wider world.

“The woman was Greek, of Syrophoenician ancestry. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.” — Mark 7:26

11. Herodians, the Herodian Family, and Roman Rule

The Herodians were not a theological sect, but a political group associated with Herodian rule. In Mark, they sometimes appear alongside the Pharisees, although the two were not the same kind of group.

“The Pharisees went out and consulted with the Herodians about how they could destroy Jesus.” — Mark 3:6

Galilee, one of the main regions of Jesus' public ministry, was then governed by Herod Antipas. The whole region ultimately remained within Rome's imperial power structure. At the story's end, Jesus is handed over to the Roman governor Pilate and executed by crucifixion, a Roman punishment.

As you read Mark, keep two forms of power in view: Jewish religious institutions and the Roman political rule behind them.

12. Three Oversimplifications to Avoid When Reading Mark

- Do not treat Pharisees, scribes, chief priests, and Sadducees as one undifferentiated group of “religious leaders.”
- Do not directly equate “unclean” with sin, evil, or unhygienic conditions.
- Do not interpret Jesus' conflicts with religious leaders as “opposition to all law.” Many debates actually concern the law's true purpose and authority.

13. Quick Reference Guide

- Pharisees: a Jewish religious group emphasizing the law and ancestral traditions.
- Scribes: specialists in studying, teaching, and interpreting the law.
- Sadducees: closely connected with temple, priestly, and elite power; they denied the resurrection of the dead.
- Priests/chief priests/high priest: responsible for temple ceremonies, with differing levels of religious authority.

- Synagogue: a local gathering place for Scripture reading, prayer, and teaching.
- Sanhedrin: an important Jewish council in Jerusalem.
- Sabbath: a key marker of Israel's covenant life.
- Clean/unclean: ritual states in the law, not simply moral goodness or badness.
- Tax collectors: widely disliked collectors of taxes for the ruling authorities.
- Gentiles: people who are not Jewish.
- Herodians: a political group associated with Herodian rule.
- Unclean spirits: evil spirits opposed to God, not the same as ritual “impurity.”

14. Now You Can Open Mark Itself

You now know how the story moves from creation, Abraham, the exodus, the law, David's kingdom, the prophets, exile, and return to the Jewish world under Roman rule. You also know that people at the time were discussing the Messiah, the kingdom of God, resurrection, law, and purity.

Mark will not begin with a lengthy genealogy or historical explanation. Instead, it directly announces good news and quickly brings Jesus onto the scene.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” — Mark 1:1

15. Three Questions to Keep Asking as You Read

- What does this passage show me about who Jesus is and the authority he has?
- How do people in the story respond to Jesus—with faith, confusion, discipleship, or opposition?
- How is this passage connected with the “kingdom of God”?

Next step: begin reading Mark itself—start with 1:1–15 and explore “good news, wilderness, baptism, temptation, and the kingdom of God.”