

Section Four:
Mark 11-13
*Will you honour
the Son?*

Mark 11:1-25 *A Royal Entrance*

Before you start...

This passage is packed full of Old Testament background. Using the **Quotation/Allusion Tool**, look up the following passages and consider how they help us understand the significance of Jesus' words and actions:

- Zechariah 9: 9-17
- Malachi 3:1-5
- Jeremiah 7:1-15
- 1 Kings 8:33-34

Another useful tool for this passage is the **Tone and Feel Tool: As we come to the Bible, we should not only pay attention to the point that is being made, but also how it is being made. What feelings does the passage evoke?**

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

King Jesus judges Old Israel: feel the enormity of this

This passage starts a new section in Mark's Gospel, which returns to some themes that were prominent at the start of the book, but which we have not seen in the last few chapters. Once more Jesus is surrounded by great crowds. Once more Jesus encounters the scribes, Pharisees and other Jewish leaders. Once more he clashes with these representatives of 'Old Israel' (see 3:7-35).

The section starts with a bang: for centuries the Jews had been waiting for their Christ (King) to come to the temple in Jerusalem (see Malachi 3:1, quoted in Mark 1:2), and now Jesus makes his grand entrance! The streets are packed with crowds of people shouting and spreading clothes and leaves before Jesus as a mark of honour, and Jesus deliberately rides on a colt, calling to mind Zechariah 9:9-17 where God's promised King comes to Jerusalem on a colt, bringing triumph, peace and salvation. The quote from Psalm 118:25-26 in verses 9-10 also points to God's Old Testament promises of a King. This is the kind of entrance we would expect from the Christ. The crowds (and the reader) are full of anticipation: could this be the moment where Jesus seizes power and saves his people?

There is more drama to come in verses 11-25! An initially random-seeming incident with a fig tree encloses a sensational episode in the temple: business as usual is suddenly interrupted by Jesus overturning the tables, driving out the vendors, and condemning their practices in the strongest terms. The Old Testament quotations in verse 17 strengthen Jesus' condemnation: in Jeremiah 7:11 God denounces the Israelites who shamelessly worship other gods and break God's commands while blindly trusting their performance of religious acts in the temple to keep them

safe. In Jeremiah 7 God goes on to announce the destruction of the temple in which they trusted. Could it be that Jesus has a similar message for the Jews of his time?

The incident with the fig tree confirms this. The sandwich structure (fig tree - temple - fig tree) helps us to identify Jesus' cursing of the fig tree as an acted parable of his judgment on the temple. Just like the fig tree, the temple is all 'leaves' and no 'fruit': it is busy with people making sacrifices and praying to God (leaves), but it is lacking in real devotion to God (fruit). This will become clear through Old Israel's response to Jesus in the rest of this section, a response which we get a taste of in verse 18.

We must not miss the shock of this passage: Jesus condemns the temple! The temple was God's chosen means of living amongst his people; it represented relationship with God, and it was the place where people could pray to God and have their sins forgiven (see 1 Kings 8:33-34). However, Jesus not only announces the destruction of the temple and condemnation on those who trusted in it, he also announces a new way of relating to God. In verses 22-25 he reassures his disciples that prayer and forgiveness are still possible for those who have faith, pointing to himself as the replacement of the temple. This would have been earth-shaking stuff for the Jews. They were right to be "astonished at his teaching" (verse 18).

Having read chapters 8-10 of Mark's Gospel, we can understand how Jesus replaces the temple. We are incapable of relating to God based on our own merit, and can only relate to him by faith in Jesus and his ransoming death. The temple system, which could not deal with our persistent rebellion against God, is now irrelevant.

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

Key to this section is the idea that Old Israel and the temple system that went with it have failed, are under judgement, and are replaced by Jesus. This is a massive shift in the Bible's storyline, but its significance can be lost on us who live 2000 years after the temple ceased to exist. Here are some suggestions for conveying the enormity of it:

- Group members' understanding will be greatly helped if they come to the study having read some of the relevant Old Testament passages in advance. You could give the four passages in **Before you start...** to the group, perhaps asking each member to read one and come ready to share with the group about the significance of the passage.
- For non-Christian groups you could print a few key quotations from the Old Testament, and use them to introduce important Old Testament ideas such as the temple and God's promised Christ/King. This is a reminder that the whole of history before Jesus leads up to his coming; he is not a random figure who turned up out of nowhere 2000 years ago.
- Showing a picture of the temple in Jerusalem highlights its significance through the sheer amount of space it occupied in the city! (Google Images is helpful, for example the images found on [this website](#)) The temple could also be compared to Tian'anmen Square and the Forbidden City in terms of its central position, historical significance, and the way it stood for the nation as a whole (although this comparison fails to convey the temple's religious significance). This goes some way to conveying how controversial Jesus' behaviour was!

- A visual aid of a leafy plant and a withered plant illustrates how starkly effective Jesus' judgement on the fig tree was - and points to a similarly destructive effect on the temple.

The Tone and Feel tool could be used with groups to help them feel the mood of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem and cursing of the temple - you could ask:

- **If you were making a movie of this passage, what sort of music would you choose to accompany each scene?**

A study on this passage could be structured around the 'Big Question':

- **What is the significance of Jesus entering Jerusalem?**

Engaging with presuppositions:

Group members may well be wondering: how is this relevant to me?? We take it for granted that we do not relate to God through a temple, so struggle to see the relevance of Jesus judging the temple system. However, for first century Jews this passage would mark a mind-blowing change in how to relate to God. The temple system was a God-given way of relating to him - but it only worked if the people were obedient to God. Jesus' judgment on the temple shows that the Jews have ultimately failed to live in obedience to God, and that therefore this whole religious system is to be abolished (note that Jesus didn't tell them to pick the tables up again and treat the temple better next time - rather, he announces that the whole temple will be destroyed, see 13:1-2). This incident warns us of the ultimate failure of all religious systems that depend on human effort, and points us to our need for Jesus' death in our place. We can ask:

- **How would you feel about Jesus' actions if you were a first century Jew?**

- **Do you think Jesus was right to judge Old Israel?**

This question will be revisited in the next passage for those who are not yet sure - so don't worry if group members are not convinced by this passage! However, we should note that before Jesus judges the temple he displays that he is God's promised, righteous King in verses 1-10.

This passage is also a challenge to those who find it hard to accept that God is Judge as well as Saviour. Here we see the compassionate Lord Jesus full of righteous anger at how people have dishonoured God. Jesus is not indifferent about human sin; he is passionate in judgment.

➔ Responding to the passage

In our response we should take time to appreciate how momentous this event is in the history of God's people (see above).

We should also consider what Mark is telling us about Jesus here:

- **How should this passage influence your view of Jesus?**

Jesus is a mighty King to rejoice in - we can meditate on the way he is described in Zechariah 9:9-17. He is also an uncompromising Judge with a blazing concern for God's honour.

We can also search our own hearts for the same “fruitless worship” that Old Israel displayed:

- **In what ways are we in danger of “fruitless worship”?**

Is our Christianity based on faith in Jesus and displayed through prayer to God our Father (verses 22-25)? Or are we mostly concerned with outward Christian activity?

After returning home, returnees might find that there is little that is outwardly impressive about their church or their own Christian activity. However, if they learn to treasure relating to God by faith and prayer (which are unseen), they will continue to stand firm even in a hard environment.

Mark 11:27-12:44 *The Cornerstone*

Before you start...

Using the **Tone and Feel Tool** consider for each episode in this passage:

- How does it make you feel about Jesus?
- How does it make you feel about those who oppose Jesus?

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

See that King Jesus is right to judge Old Israel

This long passage is probably best split over two Bible studies, but the main point runs throughout: the judgment on Old Israel announced so starkly by Jesus in the previous passage is utterly deserved.

This passage contains 4 episodes with the same structure: members of the Jewish religious elite ask Jesus a question, in most cases attempting to trick him. Jesus' response not only avoids their "clever traps", but in every case turns the tables on them, demonstrating their own stubborn rejection of God:

11:27-33: The chief priests and co. refuse to admit that Jesus' authority comes from God; they are driven by fear of man.

12:13-17: The Pharisees and Herodians are shown up: they do not give God his due.

12:18-27: The Sadducees neglect God's word and God's power; they are concerned only to trick Jesus.

12:28-34: Despite the scribe's wise answer, he is still not in God's kingdom.

The parable in 12:1-12 illustrates the magnitude of their guilt, which is ultimately displayed in their attitude to Jesus. The tenants represent the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day and throughout Israel's history (see Isaiah 5:1-17 for the Old Testament background on this). They rebel against God's rightful rule and show an utter lack of respect in the way they treat his Son - so God will respond by destroying them (12:9) and vindicating his Son (12:10-11).

Jesus' teaching in 12:35-37 declares his ultimate God-given authority as the mighty Christ who will judge all his opponents, leaving us in no doubt that he has the right to condemn Old Israel.

Thus the reader is left with two deep impressions: horror at Old Israel's disregard for God and opposition to his King, and awe at Jesus' mighty authority to judge his opponents. As mentioned in the previous passage, Jesus judging Old Israel is a momentous event in the Bible's history: Old

Israel's failure to respect God's King represents the rebellion in all of our hearts and the hopelessness of our position without Jesus' saving intervention. This in turn points to the necessity of Jesus' death.

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

1. A modern retelling of the parable of the tenants can help expose the shocking nature of the tenants' behaviour, such as the following:

Your father lives overseas and owns a house in China which he lets out to a group of tenants - but after signing the contract and moving in they refuse to pay the rent! He texts, emails, phones them - but no reply. He contacts the letting agency and asks them to send someone round to collect the rent. Not only do the tenants refuse to pay up, they are incredibly rude to the agent. The agency sends someone else round - and this time the tenants beat him up. Wanting to give the tenants one last chance before calling the police, your father finally sends round your older brother - surely the tenants will respect him! But, thinking that once the landlord's son is out of the way the house will be theirs' to enjoy, they kill your brother.

2. For group members unfamiliar with King David's place in Israel's history, you could compare his importance to that of Qin Shi Huang, the First Emperor of China. He is looked back to as a formidable ruler and the unifier of China, and it is hard to imagine any ruler having the audacity to claim to be greater than Qin Shi Huang. Likewise, in these verses Jesus claims to be greater than the greatest man in Israel's history!

Engaging with presuppositions:

1. For Chinese people (and all non-Jewish nations!) it can be tempting to think that all this stuff about Old Israel is irrelevant for me and my country. It can be helpful to describe Old Israel as a microcosm for the whole of humanity: God chooses the nation of Israel, makes great promises to them, rescues them from slavery, puts them in a good land with good laws - but the people rebel and refuse to listen to him again and again and again as illustrated by the parable of the tenants. Their rebellion is brought to a climax in their opposition to (and eventual murder of) God's own Son Jesus. The lessons we learn about Old Israel are true for the whole world.

In the previous passage the question **Do you think Jesus was right to judge Old Israel?** was raised. Here we see the answer more clearly, and we can take this further by asking:

- **How do people today demonstrate a similar attitude to Jesus as that of Old Israel?**
- **How does this passage act as a warning?**

2. Seekers in particular may have questions about the concept of "resurrection" in verses 18-27. On one hand, raised in an atheist education system, they might think that any talk of life after death is unrealistic and unscientific. On the other hand, coming from a culture heavily influenced by Buddhism, they might think Jesus is talking about some kind of reincarnation. Therefore it is

worth explaining that the Bible teaches people will rise from the dead with a physical body, but to live in a new earth, never again to die.

➔ Responding to the passage

Our response to this passage should mainly be in terms of a mindset shift as we contemplate the extent of Jesus' authority and the horror of opposing him. Questions could include:

- **How does this passage make you feel about Old Israel?**
- **How should this shape how we feel about our own sin?**

- **What words might you use to describe Jesus in this passage?**
- **How will knowing this Jesus help you continue as a Christian back home?**

For anyone who views becoming a Christian as adding a "Jesus app" to the smartphone of their life (see 8:27-9:1!) this passage is a challenge. Jesus is the mighty King and Judge of the earth, not an optional add-on! However, such a Jesus is worth following even when others around us might despise him or dismiss him as irrelevant (as may be the case for many returnees back in China): Jesus will eventually be seen as the great King (12:10 "the cornerstone"), and will destroy his enemies (12:9, 36).

Mark 13 *Stay Awake!*

Before you start...

Use the **Repetition Tool** to identify the main response Jesus wants his disciples to make to the teaching in this chapter.

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

Jesus' return is imminent, so stay awake

There's a lot of stuff that looks confusing in this passage - but the repetition tool highlights that Jesus' purpose in giving this teaching is very clear: he wants his disciples to "stay awake" and "be on guard" for the day he will return.

The context for the discussion is Jesus' announcement in verse 2 that the temple will be utterly destroyed, which is a shocking prediction of judgment for the Jewish people, as we have seen in this section. Four of the disciples ask Jesus when this will happen, and in his reply he instructs them to look beyond the temple's destruction to the day he will return in glory, which will be a far greater day of judgment.

Three main events or periods of time are referred to in this chapter. Firstly, in verses 5-13 Jesus describes the ongoing state of the world right up until his return: this will be a time when false Christs arise, wars and natural disasters rage, Christians are persecuted by religious bodies, the state and their own families, and the gospel will be proclaimed to all nations. Verses 14-23 describe a one-off, horrific event: the fall of the temple in Jerusalem (fulfilled in AD 70 when the Roman army besieged and conquered Jerusalem). In verses 24-27 Jesus describes a day when he will come in glory as the Son of Man who will rule the earth (see Daniel 7:13), shaking the whole cosmos and gathering his people.

So how does this answer the disciples' question in verse 4? Firstly, Jesus tells them that the events of verses 5-13 are *not* signs that the end is about to take place (verses 7-8) - so we should not believe those who make predictions about the timing of Jesus' return based on wars, natural disasters etc. Jesus uses the analogy of the fig tree in verses 28-29 to interpret events: the fig tree "leaves" are the destruction of the temple ("these things" in verses 29-30), which show that "summer" is near, i.e. the coming of the Son of Man. The temple has been destroyed - so now Jesus' return is the next event on God's agenda!

This is why Jesus impresses upon his disciples that they must "stay awake" in verses 32-37: they don't know when he will come back, but it could happen at any time - so they must be ready for Jesus' return and be found still repenting and believing in him on that day. This is also true for Jesus' followers now: are we looking forward to Jesus' return and living in light of it... or have we "fallen asleep"?

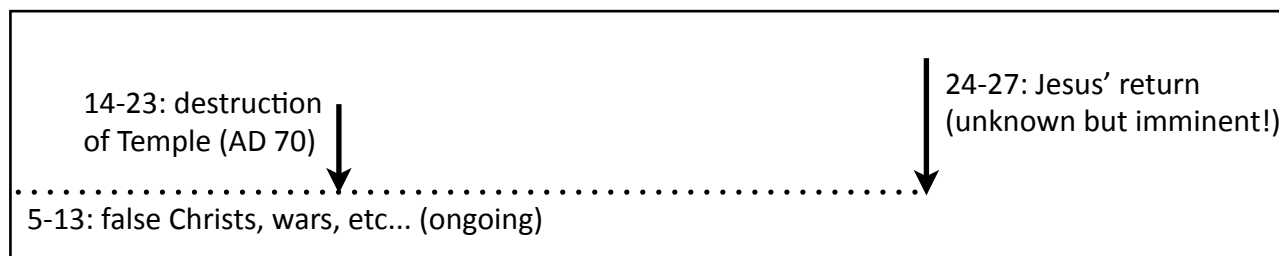
➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

To set up the idea of looking forward to Jesus' return, you could ask the starter question:

- **What are you looking forward to in the next few months?**

Some form of visual aid is recommended to clearly convey the timeline Jesus describes in this passage, such as a creative variation on the following:



Engaging with presuppositions:

“Until you know about life, how can you know about death?”

This famous saying by the highly influential Chinese philosopher Confucius has shaped traditional Chinese views on life after death. We face so many challenges to live well in this world; surely our priority is to get this right, rather than to waste time on the hazy question of the afterlife? However, Jesus tells us here that our life in this world should be shaped by an awareness that he will return and gather us to be with him, just as the servants in verse 34 are to be constantly aware of the master's return. This does not mean that we are to retreat from the world, but it means that our life in this world should be lived with an awareness that the world will not last forever, and it should not be where we set our hearts. Returnees need to think through the implications of living with such a worldview, which is so different to that of friends and family around them

Things can only get better!

In many ways, things are getting better and better in China: the economy, living standards, freedom, opportunities to make money... and this can lead to a sense of optimism about life in this world. However, Jesus teaches that this world will continue to be marked by wars, famines, earthquakes and persecution until he returns (verses 7-13), pushing us to look forward to his return and to not have unrealistically high expectations of life now.

False Christs

Jesus warns in verses 6, 21 and 22 that people will claim to be the Christ, or claim that he has already returned. Returnees may well encounter such claims back in China, through groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses who deny that Jesus is God, or through Chinese cults like Eastern Lightning (东方闪电) who claim that Jesus has already returned in the person of a Chinese woman, and who primarily target Christians. This passage is a good opportunity to identify and warn against such teachings.

➔ Responding to the passage

A response to this passage requires a shift in our worldview: do we really believe Jesus could return at any time? How would we feel if he returned before the events we mentioned in the starter question that we are looking forward to? To unpack the command to “stay awake” you could ask:

- **What will it mean in practice to stay awake?**

Make sure we keep going as Jesus' follower, listening to his words (Mark 4:20), turning from sin and trusting Jesus' death.

Proclaim the gospel to all nations - this must happen before Jesus returns (verse 10).

- **What pressures might Christians back in China face to “fall asleep”?**

Family members might oppose them wholeheartedly following Jesus. They might find that an all-consuming job leaves little time listen to Jesus' words and spend time with other Christians. They might be distracted by family and society's expectations that they will settle down, buy a house, provide for their children's education....

- **How can we remind each other that Jesus' return is imminent?**