

Mark's Gospel

for Chinese returnees

Prepared for the Return

Introduction

The Gospel of Mark: one of the books most often taught in our churches, both to introduce non-Christians to Jesus and to grow disciples of Jesus. There are lots of resources on Mark's Gospel out there, so you might well be wondering '*What's different about this one?*'

This resource is designed to help those who are teaching Mark's gospel to Chinese people, with a particular focus on preparing them to return home. This makes it suitable for studying with those who are currently overseas and may return to China some time in the future (however distant), and also with those who have recently returned to China from a period of time overseas. Returnees to China face a huge variety of challenges to their Christian faith, some of which are common to all Christians, while others are unique to returnees. This resource seeks to engage with issues that returnees will face and to address them with the teaching of Mark's Gospel.

On one hand, these notes provide general pointers for anyone leading Bible studies on Mark's Gospel: they introduce the main ideas to teach from each passage, give some suggestions of how to teach them, and the main ways in which we should respond. On the other hand, they are particularly tailored to Chinese returnees in two ways. Firstly, the application from each passage addresses particular challenges that returnees will face as they seek to keep living for Jesus back in China, and help the Bible study group leader to direct discussion of these issues. Secondly, these notes consider some of the main 'presuppositions' that Chinese people may have when they encounter the teaching in Mark's Gospel, and suggest ways to engage with these presuppositions. The primary aim of these notes is to help Christian returnees stand firm in Christ, but they also provide suggestions for teaching Mark's Gospel to non-Christians. This is designed to help those who are leading seekers' Bible studies, and also to equip Christian returnees to think through how they might share the things they are learning in Mark's Gospel with non-Christian friends and family back home.

This is not a complete set of Bible studies, but rather a series of pointers to help those who are leading Bible studies on Mark's Gospel. Some suggestions of questions are provided, but these will need to be supplemented or adapted, allowing each leader to design Bible studies that will best serve their group.

Explanation of some of the features of this resource:

◆ Mark's 'Purpose'

God speaks with a purpose! He wants to shape our beliefs, attitudes, thoughts and lives to be more and more pleasing to him. In Mark's Gospel God wants us to understand that Jesus is his promised King (the Christ), trust in Jesus' life-giving death, and give our lives to following this great King. Each episode in the gospel contributes in some way towards God achieving this purpose in the reader.

Each chapter in this resource begins with an explanation of Mark's purpose in including the passage. It is summarised in a short sentence which captures the main point of the passage and the effect it is intended to have on the reader. Bearing this purpose in mind will help us to lead Bible studies that achieve *God's* purpose, rather than our own.

◆ 'Before you start...'

Most of the studies begin with a box introducing a "tool" to aid our study of Mark's Gospel. Many of these come from 'Dig Deeper' by Nigel Beynon and Andrew Sach (IVP 2005) which introduces some general principles for understanding the Bible. Becoming familiar with these "tools" ourselves will help us to discover what God is saying in Mark. You may also wish to introduce some of the tools to your Bible study group members, equipping them to read God's word on their own. Of course, reading the Bible is not just a mechanical matter of applying a set of tools and we must humbly pray for God to speak to us as we prepare to study it.

**Section One:
Mark 1-4**

***Will you listen to
the King?***

Mark 1:1-15 *Big News!*

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

Good news! Jesus really is God's promised King, come to deal with sin, so repent and believe

This passage is the introduction to Mark's Gospel, and Mark wants us to pay attention. This is not just a normal story. This is wonderful, momentous news!

Why?? Because the Christ has come. The King promised by God hundreds of years before Mark was born, who will judge the world and save God's people, he is here! Even before we meet him in Mark's Gospel, we are told why he has come: to deal with sin. Firstly, the Isaiah quote in Mark 1:3 points to the Christ who would deal with sin. Secondly, John the Baptist's work (as the messenger who prepares the way for Jesus) focusses on "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4).

So how should we respond to such momentous news? Jesus tells us himself in verse 15: we are to "repent and believe in the gospel". The call to repent and believe will be underlined and explained over and over again as we read on through the rest of Mark's Gospel.

In teaching this passage, we should have the same aim as Mark. We should encourage those we're teaching to see how momentous the news of Jesus' coming is, even if they are already familiar with it - and to be excited about reading on in Mark. And we should help them begin to consider what it will mean for them to repent and believe in light of this news.

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

Clearly, this is a passage all about Jesus! You could begin with a starter question like:

- **If you asked people back in China to think of 3 words to describe Jesus, what might they say?***

Answers might include: *a good teacher; a myth; Western; a moral example*

In revisiting this question at the end of the study (**How would you describe the Jesus of this passage in 3 words?**) you can highlight how Mark's Gospel may challenge our presuppositions about who Jesus is (even for those who have been Christians for a long time).

* It is less intimidating to ask what "people back in China" think than to ask "what do you think?" - if you ask the latter, you run the risk of people giving the answer they think you want to hear, rather than saying what they really think!

Engaging with presuppositions:

- **History:** Non-Christians are likely to be skeptical about the historical authenticity of Mark's gospel, particularly as many of those educated in China will have been taught that Jesus is not even a historical figure. Christians may also have their doubts. It is worth explaining briefly that Mark was a real person and the events he recorded are historical - but try to avoid discussions about historicity dominating the first study! Point out that the best way of discerning whether or not a historical text is accurate is to read it for yourself; you could also point group members to an article in Chinese on the historicity of the New Testament, which can be found at <http://www.seaturtles.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2010/10/The-Bible1.pdf>)
- **Kings:** Mark's gospel is a book all about the good news that Jesus is King - however, 'king' is not necessarily a positive concept for Chinese people; historically, emperors have often been viewed as oppressive, distant tyrants. This means you might have to do a bit of work to demonstrate that a good king is good news and to engage with what people in the group may be thinking. For example, you could ask:
 - **When thinking about kings, what ideas might people from China have in their head?**
 - **Why would a good king be good news?**

Don't Panic!!

One potential difficulty in this passage is the large number of Old Testament references - particularly if you're studying it with non-Christians who may never have read the Bible before. But before you despair and exclaim "How will I ever explain who Isaiah and Malachi were, and that the description of John the Baptist in verse 6 is like the description of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8, and who Elijah was and why it matters??" remember that Mark included these references for a reason. He's trying to make a point.

If you were a Chinese non-Christian you would have good reason to think that Christianity must be irrelevant because it's so *new* - Chinese civilisation has been around since at least 3000BC, and influential philosophies such as Confucianism and Daoism flourished around the 6th century BC. If Christianity only began after the death of Jesus in 1st century AD, then how do Christians account for the thousands of years of history before Jesus??

We've seen that part of Mark's purpose is to show that Jesus is *God's promised King* - this is important. Because once we know a little bit about the Old Testament we see that Jesus is not 'new', and God was not absent from human history for thousands of years before suddenly deciding to intervene and send Jesus. Rather, God has been working throughout history to tell people about Jesus and to prepare the way for Jesus. Rather than being a late addition to the world religions, Jesus' life is the climax of history. Wow!

You could use the Olympic Games to illustrate this. A country is selected to host the Olympics seven years before the event itself (this is a recent memory for China and the UK!). This begins years of large-scale planning, building stadiums, upgrading the transport system, publicity, etc etc. The Games themselves are only two weeks long, but they are the culmination of many years' preparation, and they leave a legacy that lasts for years into the future. Similarly, Jesus only lived on earth for 32 years, but the preparation for his life began millennia before he was born, and the

impact of his life and death can still be felt today. We only need to look at a Bible to see this: Mark's Gospel is preceded by hundreds of pages of Old Testament - which was all written to help us understand Jesus.

So don't be afraid of the Old Testament quotes/references; use them to help teach Mark's purpose. At the same, time, don't feel you need to explain *every* Old Testament reference in detail; be selective and avoid over-complicating the study. A timeline (see appendix) is a good way of explaining Old Testament allusions visually, and emphasising that the events recorded in the Bible are history, not myth.

➔ Responding to the passage

- Jesus is BIG news, and GOOD news. It is important for all of us to be convinced of this - and particularly important for our Chinese friends who are preparing to return home. This will help them avoid falling into the trap of thinking that Jesus is just a part of life in the UK, but irrelevant for life back home. You could ask:

- **According to this passage, why is Christianity such important news?**
- **Why is it important news for our friends and families back home?**

- **After you return home, what situations/people might make you doubt that Christianity is good news?**

- This passage also introduces "repent and believe" as key responses: this is how we first became a Christian, and how we continue as a Christian. Having clear expectations for Christian experience will help our friends to stand firm, whether in the UK or in China.

- **How can we make repentance and belief an everyday response?**

- **Unanswered Questions:** Mark is a story, and we've only just begun it! This passage raises more questions than it answers - and should thereby make us want to read on to find out the answers. Don't feel you need to answer every question as soon as it is raised: "That's a good question, come back next week!" is sometimes good enough! But do remember (and write down?) these questions and make sure you do come back to them in later weeks. Some unanswered questions we're left with at the end of this passage are:

- **What kind of king is Jesus?**
- **What is the kingdom of God like?**
- **What does it mean to repent?**
- **What does it mean to believe the gospel?**
- **How will Jesus deal with sin?**

Mark 1:16-2:12 *Kingly Priorities*

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

Jesus brings in his kingdom with authority: be amazed!
But his priority is to forgive sins: be surprised!

This is a long passage with a lot of content, but it seems to belong together in one section. Mark's use of geographical structure markers helps to emphasise this: Jesus calls disciples by the sea in 1:16, 2:13, 3:7 and 4:1, each time beginning a new mini-section.

The flow of this mini-section goes something like this: Jesus demonstrates that he has authority to call people to leave everything and follow him (18,20); to teach (22,27); to command unclean spirits (26,27); and to heal all kinds of diseases (31,34) - the reader gets a building sense of his authority and we're meant to be amazed! Imagine the reaction if Jesus turned up in the city you live in and started doing these things! What's more, we're starting to see an answer to the question raised by 1:15: **What is the kingdom of God like?** If Jesus has authority to banish evil and heal diseases, his kingdom must be a very wonderful place.

But. As Jesus' display of authority builds to a climax in v34, he disappears off by himself. His response to Peter in v38 shapes how we should view all the amazing events of v16-34: in effect, he is saying, "I didn't come to bring in my kingdom by healing diseases; I came to preach." This should surprise us! How can preaching be more important than healing?

The rest of the passage starts to answer that question. First, there is another healing in 1:40-45 - however it is not the leper's *illness* that is emphasised, but his *uncleanness* (40, 41, 42, 44), i.e. the fact that his leprosy cuts him off from God's people, and ultimately from access to God. Then the incident in 2:1-12 lays out Jesus' priorities even more clearly: the paralytic comes to Jesus to be healed, but Jesus forgives his sin instead (2:5)! Jesus' priority is not to heal people, because people have a deeper problem than illness: sin. The problem of sin must be dealt with before Jesus' kingdom can come in all its splendour.

Due to the length of this passage, you may wish to teach it in two parts - perhaps 1:16-39 and 1:40-2:12 - but don't miss the sense of surprise that Mark intends to create by placing these incidents together.

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

The following could be used as starter questions:

- If you asked your friends, what would they say is the biggest problem facing our world today?

You could then revisit this at the end of the study:

- **What does Jesus think is the biggest problem facing our world?**

- **What people can you think of who have authority?**

This question introduces the concept of authority, helping to give an idea of what it means for Jesus to have authority to command, teach, heal and cast out evil.

Even if you split this passage into two parts, it is still quite long! If you are studying it in English with people for whom English is their second language, it might be a good idea to read it one paragraph at a time, giving group members a chance to ask about words that are unfamiliar to them. The use of a table helps bring a visual element to the study, and clarifies the main point of all the events in the passage. You could use one like this for verses 16-34:

	Who is involved?	How do the people respond?	What do we learn about Jesus?
16-20	<i>Fishermen</i>	<i>Leave everything and follow him</i>	<i>He calls people, and they listen!</i>
21-28	<i>People in synagogue; unclean spirit</i>	<i>Astonished, amazed! His fame spreads Spirit obeys Jesus</i>	<i>He teaches with authority; he commands evil spirits with authority; he opposes evil</i>
29-34	<i>Simon's mother-in-law; whole city</i>	<i>Bring many people to Jesus</i>	<i>He has great authority to heal and cast out demons</i>

Whether you teach this passage in one go, or split it into two studies, it can be helpful to introduce one 'Big Question' to the group, which you will seek to answer throughout the smaller questions of the Bible study. This helps give coherency to the study, and keep it focussed on Mark's big purpose. A good question for this study is:

- **How does this passage help us understand what Jesus has come to do?**

He has come to bring in a wonderful Kingdom - but he will do it through preaching, and through forgiving sins.

Engaging with presuppositions:

1. Authority: In last week's passage we started to engage with the idea that a good king can be good news. This passage is another chance to emphasise this, and to counter the assumption that authority is a bad thing. In fact, traditional Chinese philosophers like Confucius (a philosopher from 5th century BC whose thinking is highly influential in China even today) taught that rightly ordered relationships are the basis of a strong, peaceful society: when authority is rightly used, it is a real force for good. Confucius stressed right hierarchy in relationships: ruler over subject, father over son, teacher over pupil, etc. However, the figure in authority must use his authority kindly and wisely.

This passage is a good opportunity to show that Jesus' authority is good news: he uses it to benefit others and to break the power of evil spirits. In 1:41 Mark directs our attention to Jesus' kindness: he encounters a leper, a man whose highly contagious disease would mean that people went to

great lengths to avoid physical contact with him, but what does Jesus do? “Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him.” This is the kind of authority we like!

2. Sin: The idea of sin was introduced in the first passage, but in this passage we really start to grapple with it. Jesus seems to think that sin is a bigger problem than illness, and that it is more important to forgive sin than to heal illness. But what does this word “sin” really mean?

The Chinese word for sin (*zui* 罪) has the connotations of “crime”, so when a Chinese person reads Mark 2:5 (“My son, your sins are forgiven”), they may be wondering *What terrible crime did this paralysed man commit??* Certainly, a non-Christian Chinese person is unlikely to consider him or herself to be a sinner. Therefore it is important to consider how to explain sin in a way that shows it is a universal problem.

Rather than defining sin as the bad things we do, explaining sin in terms of a relationship is more likely to resonate with our Chinese friends. You could build on the ideas of kingship and authority which have been introduced in Mark, explaining that God is the rightful, loving King of our lives, and sin is saying to God that we don’t want him to be King - we want to be our own king. This definition of sin is backed up by the scribes’ reaction in 2:7 “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” - i.e., all sin is primarily an offence against God, not against another person. As mentioned above, rightly ordered hierarchical relationships lead to stability and harmony, so we should not be surprised that rebellion against God’s authority leads to serious consequences. This is the deep problem that must be solved before we can start to talk about solving problems like illness.

Likening our relationship with God to that between a father and child is likely to resonate even more deeply with Chinese people, who have a deep-seated sense that it is right to honour and love our parents (‘filial piety’). Sin is us, the child, saying to God, our loving Father, that we do not want to have a relationship with him, despite all his goodness to us. You can think of some creative examples to help people feel how shocking this is!

Evil Spirits/ Unclean Spirits/ Demons/ 鬼/ 污灵

Both Christians and non-Christians may well have questions about these: what are they; do they really exist; why do we not experience them in the same way today??

- Mark clearly presents them as a reality, not an outdated superstition.
- The main point Mark wants us to grasp is that Jesus has power to overcome evil spirits - therefore he has power to overcome evil.
- Non-Christians may be skeptical about the existence of spiritual forces of evil - but they are still likely to believe in evil. While we want them to see that the Bible teaches that evil spirits really exist, this is not a point to have a long discussion over. Focus on how amazing it is that Jesus has authority over evil - and point out that this clearly shows he is on the side of good.
- Many Chinese people do have a sense that spirits exist. This passage is especially good news for anyone who fears the power of evil spirits or ghosts: they do not need to fear, as Jesus is stronger than evil.

Revisiting unanswered questions:

As promised, many of the questions raised by the first passage begin to be answered in this passage:

- **What kind of king is Jesus?** *A compassionate King with great authority which he uses for others' good*
- **What is the kingdom of God like?** *A wonderful place where the King has banished evil and illness*
- **What does it mean to repent?** *To recognise our sins need forgiveness*
- **What does it mean to believe the gospel?** *To believe in Jesus' authority to bring in God's kingdom, and to forgive sins*
- **How will Jesus deal with sin?** *By forgiving it*

This passage also raises some unanswered questions of its own:

- **Why does Jesus command people not to tell others about him?** (25, 34, 44)

➔ Responding to the passage

- Mark's purpose is to amaze us with Jesus' authority, and to surprise us with his priority. We are often over-familiar with these facts, so try to use the drama and surprising twists in Mark's narrative to make the surprises hit home. To help people consider Jesus' amazing power from a fresh angle you could ask:

- **Imagine that Jesus came to Beijing/Shanghai and did these things - how would you feel? How would people respond?**

- While Mark shows us that the kingdom of God will not be established through endless healings and exorcisms, he does want us to rejoice in the glimpse into God's kingdom that we see here. It is a bit like a show home: a model house intended to show potential buyers what the completed housing development will be like and entice them to buy a house in it. No one actually lives in the show home - it is a taster of the real home to come. Here in Mark's gospel we have a taster of the kingdom, which has not yet come in full, intended to entice us and make us ask: "How can I get this??" You could ask:

- **How does this passage make you long for the kingdom of God?**

- We should also feel the surprise of Jesus' priority (preaching; forgiving sins) and consider the implications of this priority for all of life - including life back home in China. For example:

- **When do we find it hard to accept that Jesus prioritises forgiveness over healing?**
- **How might Jesus' priorities impact the priorities of our church back home?**
- **If you could share one thing from this passage with your family back home, what would it be?**

Mark 2:13-3:6 *Rejoicing and Rejection*

Before you start...

As mentioned in the Introduction, we will introduce some 'tools' to help you as you study Mark's gospel for yourself.

Structure Tool: How has Mark broken down his material into sections? How do these sections fit together?

Using the **Structure Tool**:

- Divide this passage into episodes/scenes.
- What do each of the episodes have in common?

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

Rejoice in Jesus' kingdom, which is open to sinners, not the self-righteous religious.

The **Structure Tool** shows us that opposition to Jesus is an important theme: this passage consists of four episodes (five if 2:1-12 is included) in which Jesus clashes with the religious establishment (the scribes and the Pharisees). Mark draws our attention to the fast escalation of the opposition: in 2:6 the scribes are "questioning in their hearts", while by 3:6 the Pharisees are plotting "how to destroy him".

Despite these dark tones, Mark wants us to rejoice as we read this passage! In fact, we are to rejoice in the very things that annoy the Pharisees so much. They thought that the Christ would come to bring in God's kingdom for the righteous (like themselves!), but Jesus smashes their assumptions in 2:17 by declaring that he came "not to call the righteous, but sinners". This makes perfect sense of what we saw in the previous passage: Jesus primarily directs his mighty authority towards forgiving sins (2:5,10), so it follows that he has come to call sinners (those who need forgiveness) to his kingdom.

The Pharisees reveal that they haven't understood this as they continue to quibble about religious observances in 2:18, 2:24 and 3:2. Jesus responds by telling them they've utterly missed the point: he has come to do something new and wonderful, and failure to account for this is disastrous (this is the point of 2:19-22). A series of joyful imagery appears in 2:18-28: the bridegroom, new wine, new garments, real Sabbath rest, feasting and an end to fasting. These are not random images; they all pick up on language used by the Old Testament prophets to point people to God's coming kingdom which will be for a *new* people (not just Jews) in a *new* creation (not the land of Israel). This kingdom is something to rejoice greatly in! We also learn who the kingdom is for: forgiven sinners, and *not* those who try to achieve their own righteousness by rigorously sticking to the

letter of the law. The passage warns us that self-righteousness is not only wrong, it is dangerous: the self-righteous Pharisees have hardened hearts and end this passage plotting to destroy God's mighty, compassionate, promised King.

This passage introduces the clash between Jesus and the religious in Israel - a theme that will be developed throughout Mark. We begin to see on one hand the danger of relying on our own religious acts, and on the other hand that God is opening a new way for sinners to enter his kingdom regardless of their religious performance. This should give us great joy - but also cause us to search our own hearts for the self-righteousness of the Pharisees.

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

Mark's first century readers would have been very familiar with Pharisees and tax collectors, but they are not people we tend to meet every day! A bit of context is needed to help us understand why Jesus' interactions with these people are really radical. Here are some ways you could help a Chinese person understand how people at Jesus' time would have viewed them:

- **Tax collectors** were despised by almost everyone: not only were they often corrupt, collecting more taxes than required and pocketing the difference; they worked for the hated Roman Empire which occupied Israel. In Chinese history, they are similar to the Chinese who collaborated with Japanese invaders in the 1930s and 40s and were given the label "*hanjian*", literally "traitors to China". Making this comparison will help Chinese people to see how astonishing it is that in 2:14 Jesus calls a tax collector to follow him, just as he had called the fishermen in 1:16-20. Even more surprisingly, Jesus eats with "many tax collectors and sinners" (1:15), indicating that he accepts them and extends friendship toward them.
- **Pharisees** on the other hand were a religious party of the Jews who were devoted to keeping all the minutiae of the Law (including extra rules that had been added on top of the Mosaic Law). They tended to be well thought of in society.

Engaging with presuppositions:

This passage deals with the question "Who is Jesus for?" Many Chinese people would say that Jesus is for:

- a) Good people who are able to meet Jesus' standards of morality
- b) Westerners (whereas Chinese people have Buddhism)
- c) Weak people who need a spiritual and psychological crutch (whereas if you are strong enough you can rely on yourself)

Even Christians may think these things subconsciously. However, Jesus' statement in 2:17 challenges all of these preconceptions:

- a) Is Jesus for good, morally upright people? No! He came to call the most despised, immoral people in society - and he says that unless we admit we are sinners, then he is not for us. The image of illness used in 2:17 is helpful: of course we do not go to the doctor when we are completely healthy! We must first recognise that we are ill, and only

then will we go to the doctor. Likewise, Jesus says that if we want to follow him, we must first recognise that we are spiritually and morally unhealthy. It may be useful to return to the explanations of sin suggested in the previous study to help convince people of the extent of the problem of sin - however, Mark will continue to persuade us we are all sinners as we keep reading his Gospel, so there will be other opportunities to revisit this theme. Shockingly, in this passage the morally upright Pharisees end up plotting to kill Jesus!

- b) Is Jesus only for Westerners? No! Not unless Westerners are significantly more sinful than people from other parts of the world...
- c) Is Jesus only for weak people? Well, in some ways the answer is yes - but we are all weak people! The religious Pharisees consider themselves to be righteous enough without Jesus' help - but their hard-hearted reaction to Jesus and lack of compassion to the man with the withered hand (3:1-6) make it clear that they are in fact not righteous at all. The doctor imagery of 2:17 teaches us that the one thing we cannot do is rely on ourselves - no more than a critically ill person can heal themselves by trying hard.

Revisiting unanswered questions:

- **Who is Jesus?** *The bridegroom (2:19-20). This builds on Old Testament ideas which portray the relationship between God and his people as being like that of a bridegroom and his bride. This metaphor both identifies Jesus with God, and has connotations of great joy, celebration and intimate relationship.*
- **What is the kingdom of God like?** *Jesus emphasises that his kingdom is a new, joyful place, by picking up on Old Testament imagery as mentioned above. Even without the Old Testament background we get a sense of the joy and celebration that Jesus has come to bring: weddings, feasting, and a deep concern for humanity. The compassion of King Jesus stands out in contrast to the hard-hearted Pharisees who view a crippled man merely as an opportunity to trick their opponent (3:2). We, the reader, long for a place where Jesus is king - but **How do we enter this kingdom?** is a question that remains unanswered.*
- **What does it mean to repent?** *The first step is to recognise that we are those Jesus has come for: "sinners", spiritually sick people.*
- **What does it mean to believe the gospel?** *This passage focusses on our reaction to Jesus: to believe is to rejoice in him and his kingdom; to disbelieve is to reject him, choosing to trust instead in our own self-righteousness.*

➔ Responding to the passage

- Mark's purpose here is to make us delight in Jesus and his kingdom. When we have been Christians for a long time we may become blasé about our great King, and even slip into the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. A deep delight in Jesus will protect us from such hard-heartedness - wherever we go in the world. This passage could be an opportunity to help those who are preparing to return home think through how they will continue to rejoice in Jesus, even when experiencing great upheaval in their church situation, friendships, lifestyle, family, etc... You could ask:

- **What reasons are there to delight in Jesus in this passage?** and enjoy reflecting together on just why each of these reasons is so wonderful!

- Mark also leaves us feeling horrified and angered by the Pharisees: they utterly lack compassion (3:4-5) and plot to kill God's glorious King because he has challenged them and their religious system. Meeting Jesus exposes the evil that is in their hearts. This passage should make us question our own hearts: where are we in danger of rejecting Jesus when he does not fit with our expectations? We might appear to be very religious - but are we rejoicing in Jesus or in our own self-righteousness? You could use a case study to help those who are preparing to go home consider the possible temptations to self-righteousness after they return, and how to guard against this. For example:

During a visit home over Christmas, you meet up with a friend from your Bible study group who has been back since the summer. You are shocked to hear the way he sounds so self-righteous when talking about the lack of morality amongst his colleagues. How can you help him to apply this section of Mark?

Mark 3:7-35 *Founding a Nation*

Before you start...

Let's look again at the **Structure Tool** (see previous study). One feature of Mark's narrative is that he often uses a "sandwich" structure, where one episode is inserted in the middle of another episode. This should make us ask: How do these two episodes work together?

Using the **Structure Tool**:

- What sandwich can you find in this passage?
- What links are there between the "bread" and "filling" of the sandwich?
- How does the sandwich help us understand the main point Mark is making in this passage?

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

King Jesus is calling a new Israel, so be amongst those who listen to him and are forgiven.

The previous passage left us feeling rather unsettled: Mark claims that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews - yet the Jewish top dogs are plotting to kill Jesus (3:6). What will Jesus do about it? And Jesus claims to be bringing in the long-awaited kingdom of God - yet he is rejected by the leaders of the Jews, God's people. So who is this kingdom for?

In this passage Mark begins to answer these questions by drawing our attention to Israel, the people of God. The place names mentioned in verses 7-8 represent the north, south, east and west of Israel: people literally flock to Jesus from the four corners of the land. All Israel is coming to Jesus. However, Jesus does not stay with this crowd; in a passage laden with Old Testament meaning he climbs a mountain and calls to himself twelve apostles (check out Exodus 24:4-11 for the significance of climbing a mountain and the number twelve). In calling these twelve men, Jesus is making an astonishingly bold statement: just as Israel was founded on twelve tribes, so Jesus' kingdom will be founded on twelve men. Leaving behind the 'old Israel' of verses 7-8 which was defined geographically and biologically, Jesus founds a 'new Israel', defined around himself. Rather than being put-off or disheartened by the rejection of the Jewish elite, Jesus calmly rejects them, and begins to build a new people of God in their place: *his* people (v13). Talk about upsetting the status quo!

Following this, Mark uses a sandwich structure to show us who can be in this 'new Israel'. The scribes' blatant misunderstanding and rejection of Jesus is the 'sandwich filling' (v22-30), enclosed in the 'bread' of Jesus' family members coming to call Jesus home (v20-21, 31-35). Both the scribes and Jesus' family have their own interpretation of what Jesus has been doing ("His family... were saying, 'He is out of his mind.' And the scribes... were saying, 'He is possessed by Beelzebub'" v21,22). Jesus sharply condemns the scribes for attributing his great works to the power of Satan - but by placing this incident in the middle of Jesus' interaction with his family, Mark is showing that Jesus' family are in as much danger as the scribes. They may not think that Jesus is from Satan -

but like the scribes they fail to recognise that his authority has come from God. Their position in v31 says it all: they are “standing outside” the house, just as their wrong attitude towards Jesus leaves them ‘outside’ Jesus’ kingdom.

If even Jesus’ family and the religious elite are left outside this new Israel, then who can be inside? Jesus tells us in v34: it is “those who sat around him”. By sitting and listening to Jesus, they are doing the will of God. Again, Jesus is controversially putting himself at the centre and declaring that the new Israel is formed of those who listen to *him*. Verses 28-30 contain a warning for those who persistently refuse to recognise Jesus, but they also contain an amazing promise for those who listen to Jesus: all sins and blasphemies can be forgiven them. This is something to rejoice in!

We leave this passage with a clear sense that Jesus has come to call a new people of God, and with a challenge to listen carefully to Jesus so that we can be in this new Israel.

➔ Communicating Mark’s purpose

Getting into the passage:

This passage upsets our assumptions about who we would expect to be in God’s kingdom: not necessarily the religious elite or Jesus’ family, but those who listen humbly to Jesus. The following starter question could help to introduce this theme:

- **If you asked someone from China: “What type of person is most likely to be a Christian?” what might they say?**

Answers may involve a person’s nationality, family background/upbringing, social position, profession, moral conduct, etc...

Especially when studying Mark with non-Christians, it can be good to have a map so you can point people to the place names mentioned and show them that these are real places; Mark’s Gospel is not a myth. With Christians too, a map is helpful in this study to show the significance of the place names in verses 7-8: they represent people gathering from all over Israel.

Study 2 introduced the idea of a ‘Big Question’. In this study you could ask:

- **Who is Jesus’ kingdom for?**

This helps to sum up what we see in both halves of the passage: verses 7-19 show us that Jesus’ kingdom is for a new Israel made up of those whom he calls, and verses 20-35 teach that this kingdom is for those who listen to Jesus and are forgiven.

For the original reader, familiar with the twelve tribes of the Jewish nation, the significance of calling twelve apostles would be clear. For most readers today this significance is not so immediately obvious, so you will need to think about how best to communicate this. One illustration that might help would be to imagine within the group that you decided to call yourselves the Politburo, select a Standing Committee, nominate a President and a Premier, and set up headquarters in a building called Zhongnanhai. Suddenly we can feel how extremely provocative Jesus’ action is!

Engaging with presuppositions:

In Chinese culture, loyalty to one's family (especially one's parents) is considered one of the highest virtues. It is easy for Chinese people to feel that Jesus' words about his family in verses 33-35 are disrespectful, immoral and off-putting. How could it possibly be right for Jesus to choose a group of strangers over his own mother and brothers? And if I follow Jesus, will he require me to disown my family in this way too?

In many ways, our Chinese friends are right to feel shocked by this: the culture of Jesus' day would have had a similarly high view of family (in this respect it was much closer to modern day Chinese culture than modern day Western culture), and the crowd sitting around Jesus would have certainly felt the impact of Jesus' words. However, the main point here is not that family relationships are unimportant; rather that our attitude to Jesus is of *utmost importance*. On one hand Jesus extends an amazing offer: if we listen to him and recognise his true identity, then we can be closer to him than his own mother and brothers. On the other hand, Jesus issues a warning: if we do not listen to him and recognise him, then we cannot be part of his kingdom - even if we are his own family members. Jesus is not encouraging us to abandon our families, but rather inviting us to join his family.

You could ask a question such as:

- **How do Jesus' words about his family make you feel? Why does Jesus say this?**

This helps us appreciate the shocking impact of Jesus' words, and points us to what Mark wants us to learn from this shocking statement.

➔ Responding to the passage

Mark uses vivid narrative here to teach us not to take for granted that certain people will automatically be in Jesus' kingdom. Try to use Mark's narrative as you encourage a response, for example:

- **Who does Jesus say are his people?... Who are not his people?... How does this make you feel?... How do people today respond to Jesus in similar ways to the characters in this passage?... Why is our response to Jesus so important?... Why is it wonderful to be in Jesus' people?**
- **What is Jesus claiming about himself in this passage?... Is this easy to accept?... What would it look like for us to 'sit around Jesus' and listen to him?**
- If you use the starter question suggested above, you could follow it up by asking: **How does Jesus challenge our ideas about who is most likely to be a Christian?**

What is the focus of our response?

The Chinese education system encourages students to be good at listening to the teacher and doing exactly what he/she says, but it is weak at training students to think for themselves. Perhaps as a result of this, many Chinese people like specific direction on how to apply God's word to everyday life (relationships, work, family...) - but we risk slipping into legalism when these directed

actions do not come from a heart that deeply knows God and wants to obey his voice out of love for him.

Many of the passages in Mark's gospel do not direct us to particular guidelines for family life or relating to others; rather they point us to the person of Jesus, teach us to know him more deeply, and to respond to him in love, awe, faith, repentance, wonder, etc. Of course, these wonderful truths about Jesus should influence every area of our life, every minute of every day, and it can be helpful to ask questions about specific areas and situations. However, let's not forget that the most important thing God wants to change is our hearts - therefore a response to God must focus on our beliefs and attitudes to him, before addressing our concrete actions.

For example, in this passage we should feel the impact of Jesus' claim to have authority to establish a 'new Israel', and we should question whether we place the same importance as Jesus does on people's response to him. This may lead us to be more submissive to Jesus' authority in the way we conduct business deals, or encourage us to get up earlier to read the Bible - but first our worldview must be shaped by God's word. The questions above attempt to reflect this emphasis.

Mark 4:1-34 *Listen Carefully*

Before you start...

Repetition Tool: Sometimes Mark repeats words, phrases and ideas to draw our attention to them.

What repeated words, phrases and ideas can you find in this passage? Why does Mark want to emphasise these concepts?

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

Keep listening to Jesus' word: despite appearances his kingdom is advancing.

This chapter is very different to the first three chapters in Mark's Gospel. Those chapters were full of fast-paced, action-packed narrative, whereas here the action all but disappears and the focus shifts to Jesus' teaching. This sudden change of pace gives the reader a chance to reflect on how we should respond to the events of chapters 1-3.

The **Repetition Tool** helps us to identify the big ideas of this passage: Jesus really wants us to *listen*; his *word* is very important; it is not enough to hear - we also need to *understand*; he is telling us more about the *kingdom of God*.

Context also helps us to grasp Mark's purpose in including this teaching section. We have seen a whole range of attitudes to Jesus in chapters 1-3: amazement, enthusiasm and whole-hearted commitment, yet also confusion, ignorance and even the desire to murder him. Perplexingly, opposition to Jesus comes from those we would expect to welcome the Christ: the religious elite and Jesus' own family. Jesus has shown us a glimpse of the kingdom of God - but rather than bringing in the kingdom with power he spends his time teaching and calling a strange, sinful collection of individuals to follow him. This could tempt us to lack confidence in Jesus' authority, and doubt that he really will bring in the glorious kingdom that God promised.

On one hand, this passage bolsters our confidence in Jesus. The parable of the sower shows that a variety of responses to Jesus is to be expected. The parables of the lamp (v21-23), grain (v26-29) and mustard seed (v30-32) teach us that although the kingdom of God seems to be hidden now, it will one day be visible to all; although the growth of the kingdom seems slow and imperceptible now, it is inevitably heading towards a great harvest; and although the kingdom seems small and insignificant now, it will one day be vast and magnificent. These right expectations prevent us losing heart at the opposition Jesus faces in Mark's Gospel - and at the opposition his message still faces today. What's more, Mark sandwiches a dialogue (v9-13) between the telling of the parable of the sower and its explanation to show us that it is Jesus who gives people understanding (v11).

Jesus is not helpless in the face of unbelief, misunderstanding and rejection: he has the power to harden people for judgment or soften them so that they listen, turn and are forgiven (v12).

On the other hand, having strengthened our confidence in Jesus, Mark wants us to respond by listening to Jesus. The difference between the three 'bad' soils and the one 'good' soil is that the bad soils do not continue to accept Jesus' word, whereas the good soil does. Chapters 1-3 make some big claims about Jesus' identity and what he came to do, and here we are called to keep on listening to Jesus, being on our guard against anything that may cause us to stop listening.

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

This passage helps us reflect on chapters 1-3 and consider our response to it - so aim to summarise the main point of each parable fairly quickly so that there is plenty of time to spend discussing our response! Visual aids can help with this, particularly when explaining concepts that are less familiar in today's world (for example, bringing in a measuring jug and a teaspoon could help to illustrate verses 24-25).

Engaging with presuppositions:

- As we serve returnees, whether overseas or in China, we are likely to encounter people who represent all the types of soil mentioned in verses 3-20. This parable is such an accurate description of real-life responses to Jesus! As you study it in your group you could discuss what it might look like for returnees to China to be these different types of soils, to help them guard against things that may make them fall away:

- **Along the path:** This could be someone who is not a Christian, but enjoys attending church events whilst overseas. However, she just sees it as an interesting part of western culture and does not consider it deeply, so as soon as she returns home she stops thinking about Christianity.
- **Rocky ground:** This could be someone who responds to the gospel with great eagerness: he comes to every Christian event, asks lots of questions in Bible study and quickly tells you that he would like to become a Christian. He sees all the benefits that being a Christian brings to his life now: a loving church community, a clear moral code to live by, a sense of peace when he prays to God. However, he does not understand that being a Christian means following Jesus in the way of the cross and will bring hardships now as well as joy. When he returns to China his parents disapprove of his faith, he finds it hard to get on with people at church, the singing and praying does not give him the same sense of peace that he had overseas, and Christian morals do not seem to work in his office environment. He decides that Christianity was just a nice part of life overseas, and gives it up after several months.
- **Thorny ground:** This could be someone who carefully considers the gospel and seems to start off really well in the Christian life. After returning home she is determined to find a church and keep growing as a Christian. But there are so many other pressures: she wants to give her son the best start in life that she can, sending him to a good school and lots of extra classes. She has to work long hours as her and her husband are saving up to buy a

house. She is always trying to keep up with her friends' lifestyles and the opportunities they give their children - there is simply no time to read the Bible and go to church. Gradually, Jesus' words seem less and less relevant to her, and after several years she has given up her faith completely.

- **Good soil:** This could be someone who faces all the same situations and pressures as the others - but he continues to listen to Jesus' word and put it into practice, even when it is difficult. If we have deep confidence in Jesus' kingdom, then we will know that it is worth listening to Jesus' words and will trust the wonderful promises he makes to those who listen to him.

- The idea that Jesus has authority over who listens to him and who rejects him can be hard to accept, and there is a risk that discussions about this could distract from reflecting on the response Mark wants us to make. We should remember Mark's purpose in telling us this: he wants to give us confidence that Jesus is king and will bring in God's kingdom, even though people reject him. It might be helpful to ask people to imagine how they would feel about Jesus if he did *not* have authority to give people the understanding they need in order to be saved. At the same time we are still responsible for how we listen, as Jesus emphasises in v3,9,23,24.

➔ Responding to the passage

The first area of response to consider is how these parables grow our **confidence** in Jesus and his kingdom. Aspects that may be particularly relevant for returnees include:

- **Consider life as a Christian back in China. When might the kingdom of God feel as insignificant as a mustard seed?**

For example: being the only Christian in one's family or office. Being laughed at for being a Christian, or passed over for promotion. Trying really hard to share the gospel, but friends, family and colleagues think it's western and irrelevant.

- **In such situations, how do these parables give us confidence to stand up for Jesus and his kingdom?**

Mark does not directly call us to a response of sharing the gospel in this passage, but by the end of the book we see clearly that Mark wants his readers to confidently tell the gospel of Jesus to others. This passage is a good place to begin discussions about this.

Having this confidence, Mark wants us to **keep listening** to Jesus. This is an opportunity to discuss in practice how we can get into good habits of listening to Jesus now, so that we are better equipped to stand firm after returning home in the future. You could discuss the importance of being in a good routine of personal Bible reading and prayer, and of getting involved in a local church as soon as possible after going home. You could also suggest that group members listen to this [interview](#), where a Christian returnee shares her experience of continuing to listen to Jesus' words after returning to her hometown.

Appendix: Bible Timeline

