

**Section Two:
Mark 4-8**

***Will you humbly
believe?***

Mark 4:35-6:6 *Fear and Faith*

Before you start...

Copycat Tool: Mark often includes certain characters as models for us to imitate or bad examples for us to avoid

What different reactions to Jesus do we see in this passage? Which ones should we copy? Which ones should we avoid?

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

Believe Jesus can deliver from death's shadow

This is a very long passage that might be best studied over two sessions (perhaps 4:35-5:20 and 5:21-6:6). However, Mark seems to be teaching us one big point from it, as can be seen from the common features between the first four episodes (the storm, the demon-possessed man, Jairus' daughter and the woman; 6:1-6 is slightly different):

- Each one involves a **desperate situation**. This is highlighted by the use of vivid language - imagine that you were with the disciples as the storm-tossed boat filled with water and started to sink. Imagine you were confronted with the demon-possessed man bursting free from his chains, crying out and cutting himself with stones. Imagine the hopelessness of the woman who had been horribly ill for twelve years, spent all her money on doctors, but got steadily worse and worse. Imagine how Jairus felt when the messengers brought him the message "Your daughter is dead". In these situations humans are utterly helpless. The idea of **death** is also highlighted (the disciples fear drowning; the demon-possessed man lives amongst tombs; Jairus' daughter actually dies).
- Jesus demonstrates **amazing power** over these situations. With a word or a touch he completely reverses the hopelessness. Nothing is too much for him. A fierce storm, a legion of destructive spirits, even death itself - he can do what he chooses with them.
- But we should also note how Jesus uses this power: in each episode he brings **deliverance** to those who are held in the grip of death. Most episodes highlight Jesus' compassion and kindness to those he delivers.
- Finally, in each case people's **response** to Jesus is an important theme. Using the **Copycat Tool** as suggested above, we can see that Mark uses different characters' responses to draw us into the narrative and make us consider our own response. The main contrast is between **faith** and **fear** - the disciples are rebuked for *fearing* the storm (4:40), the people in 5:15-17 are so *afraid* that they beg Jesus to leave them, Jesus makes it clear that

the woman's *fear* in 5:33 is unnecessary, and Jairus is told "Do not *fear*, only *believe*" (5:36). *Faith* is the response that Jesus looked for in the disciples (4:40) and the woman's *faith* heals her (5:34). This helps us see how 6:1-6 fits in - the people in Jesus' hometown display such a complete lack of faith that Jesus marvels at their *unbelief* (6:6).

This is the start of a new section in Mark's Gospel, where we will see again and again the importance of responding to Jesus in faith. In contrast, those who respond in fear show that they misunderstand something about Jesus. This passage expands our view of Jesus' identity: he is the one with authority to command nature, and even death!! It is only when we grasp the huge extent of Jesus' power to deliver that we will respond rightly to him. Therefore the presence of fear in our lives should make us question: do we really believe that Jesus has the authority to deliver from the shadow of death?

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

Whether you look at this passage in one session or two, tables are a good way of highlighting the big themes that run through the different episodes. For each episode you could ask how Mark highlights the four features mentioned above (desperate situation, Jesus' power, deliverance, response). Or, more simply, for each episode you could ask **What do we learn about Jesus?** And **What do we learn about how to respond?**

This passage is full of drama and emotion: terror, relief, horror, hopelessness, amazement, grief, joy... However you choose to teach it, think about how to make it come alive with all the colour that Mark has given it!

Engaging with presuppositions:

With so many displays of mind-blowing power, this passage may make non-Christians doubt that these events really happened. Bear this in mind as you teach it - the first step might be to tell them that you realise it may sound like a fairytale to them! But just because they have never encountered miracles like this before does not mean that they are impossible. Mark clearly expects us to be amazed by the things we read, just like the disciples in 4:41, exclaiming, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" If Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of God, we would expect him to do things that no ordinary man can do.

You can also point to a number of details in the text which help show that this is authentic history: Mark mentions that Jesus is asleep on a cushion (4:38) - why would he write that if it were not true? Research has shown that boats at that time were indeed equipped with cushions in the stern. The incident with the demon-possessed man takes place in Gentile (non-Jewish) territory - therefore it makes sense that they had a large herd of pigs (Jews do not eat pork).

Another issue that might come up in this passage is the question: "If I have faith in Jesus, can I expect a life free from illness or disaster?" Later in Mark's Gospel we will see that the answer is a resounding "no!" - but here Mark wants us to see that even in these hard times we need not fear because Jesus is with us, with the same power and compassion he displayed in this passage. The weight of this passage should be on giving us comfort because of who Jesus is, but it might be worth a brief word of explanation that Jesus does not promise immediate relief from frightening situations. As we saw in chapter 1, Jesus' kingdom *will be* a place free from sickness, evil and death

- but his priority *now* is to preach, not heal, so that more people can one day enter into his perfect kingdom. In the meantime we can have confidence that he is in control and will not leave us - therefore we can respond in faith, not fear.

➔ Responding to the passage

This passage is a great one for thinking through our own response to life's desperate, scary situations - those we face in the present, and those we will face back in China. To help us see the relevance of this passage you could use the following starter question (it may be more appropriate for groups to write down their answers if they are uncomfortable sharing something so personal at the start of the study):

• **What things keep you awake at night? What makes you anxious?**

The responses of the different characters in this passage are a good way of helping us consider our own response; you could ask the group members to think what it might look like to respond in the same way to the situations they fear:

• **Facing these situations, why do we often respond like the negative examples in this passage?**

Examples:

- *The disciples in the storm feared because it really was a serious, life-threatening situation: we might be in a truly desperate situation where it's so hard to trust Jesus.*
- *The people fear and beg Jesus to leave them (5:15-17) because he's just caused the destruction of 2000 pigs: a massive economic investment! They are terrified of how Jesus' authority might interfere with their lives. What about us?*
- *The people in Jesus' hometown are offended by him because to believe he is the Son of God would turn their world upside-down. What about us? Do we dismiss Jesus as a myth because we are afraid of the implications of believing he is God?*

• **What would it look like for us to respond like the positive examples?**

Examples:

- *In desperate situations we can remind ourselves of Jesus' control and compassion, rather than worrying and doubting that he cares: he is Lord of all the things we fear.*
- *Jairus comes to Jesus and begs for his help - we can cry out to God in prayer when we are afraid. We don't need to trust in ourselves.*
- *The demon-possessed man begged to be with Jesus: we can rejoice that Jesus is with us, even when we don't understand why a painful situation has happened.*

To help with in-depth discussion you could choose an example of a common fear for returnees and discuss how this passage helps us to face it. Examples include: fear of uncertainties about the

future - where they will live, what job they will do. Fear of being unable to find a Christian to marry - this is an especially real fear for female returnees, and is made much harder by the fact that most will face intense pressure from their parents to get married. Fear of standing out as a Christian in a secular work environment where colleagues are living for money and success. These fears are real - but if we know Jesus then we can have real comfort also.

The song below may help group members to continue to meditate on the glorious truths of this passage on their own; it is in both English and Chinese, which may be helpful for those who have only been used to studying the Bible and praying in English. You could also send them the link to this YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNLFFXklvi4>

我灵镇静

Be Still, My Soul

我灵镇静！上主今在你旁；
忧痛十架，你要忍耐担当；
信靠天父，为你安排主张；
万变之中，惟主信实永长；
我灵镇静！天友最是善良，
经过荆棘，引到欢乐地方。

我灵镇静！一切主必担当；
未来引导，仍像过去一样；
莫让何事动摇信心，希望；
目前奥秘，日后必成光明；
我灵镇静！风浪仍听主命，
正如当年，遵主吩咐平静。

我灵镇静！光阴如飞过去；
那日与主永远同在一处；
失望，忧惊，那日都要消散；
重享纯爱，忘记一切愁烦；
我灵镇静！那日眼泪抹干，
我们欢聚，永享恩眷平安。

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side;
bear patiently the weight of grief or pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
through every change He faithful will remain.
Be still my soul; your gracious heavenly friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end

Be still, my soul: your God will undertake
to guide the future as He has the past.
Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the winds and waves still know
the voice of Christ that ruled them here below

Be still, my soul, though dearest friends depart
and all is darkened in the vale of tears;
then shall you better know His love, His heart,
who comes to soothe your sorrows and your fears.
Be still, my soul; your Jesus can repay
from His own fulness all He takes away.

Be still, my soul: the day is hastening on
when we shall be for ever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief and fear are gone,
sorrow forgotten, love's pure joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past,
in His safe presence we shall meet at last.

Katharina von Schlegel, 1752

Mark 6:6-30 *Real Repentance*

Before you start...

In chapter 3 we used the **Structure Tool** to discuss Mark's use of a 'sandwich' structure. There is another sandwich in today's passage: Herod is 'sandwiched' into Jesus' sending out of the apostles.

- How do the two incidents relate to each other?

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

True faith requires repentance - beware unrepentance

At first glance, it is difficult to see the links between Jesus sending out the apostles and the incident with Herod and John the Baptist. However, when we look more closely a pattern emerges. Both sections describe messengers going out with **Jesus' authority**: the apostles have authority over unclean spirits, they proclaim a message of repentance and they heal the sick, which are all key things that Jesus has been doing so far in Mark's Gospel. As we saw in chapter 1, John the Baptist is also a representative of Jesus. In both sections, the messengers preach that people should **repent** - this is what Mark emphasises about the apostles' preaching (verse 12), and in verse 18 John is urging Herod to repent (see 1:4). In both cases, it is important to **listen** to the messenger: verse 11 implies judgment on those who refuse to listen, and the incident with Herod vividly depicts the danger of refusing to listen.

This passage builds on some big themes in this section of Mark's Gospel. In the previous passage we saw the importance of **responding in faith** to Jesus, and Herod's confusion about Jesus in verses 14-16 reminds us that **Jesus' identity** is still a key issue in this passage. Herod shows us that faith and repentance go hand-in-hand: he does not grasp that Jesus is the Christ, he refuses to listen to Jesus' messenger, and his actions display that he is unwilling to repent. He is the perfect model of how **not** to respond! As we study Herod we should recognise that true faith always involves repentance, and are warned of the dangers of failing to repent.

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

This passage is intended to warn us about unrepentance - a danger that we often fail to recognise as Christians. You could ask a starter question like:

- **What are some of the biggest dangers for Christians?**

And revisit it at the end of the study to discuss that we need to be aware of the danger of unrepentance.

Asking the group to think about the similarities between the apostles and John the Baptist should help to highlight the main themes of this passage. Having done that, we can use Mark's vivid description of Herod to draw us into the narrative: Mark really slows down and concentrates on Herod, giving us insight into his thoughts and feelings to help us consider how we might be in display similar signs of unrepentance. You could ask half the group to look for positive things about Herod in this passage (he recognises that John is *righteous*, he *hears John gladly*, he feels *exceedingly sorry* at the thought of beheading John), and the other half to look for negative things about Herod (these are easier to find!) to show that Mark presents him as a complex character.

Engaging with presuppositions:

When we talk to people about the response that Jesus requires it is much easier to emphasise faith than repentance. This is perhaps because we fear that if we teach people that Jesus requires them to change their actions they might misunderstand and think that they can earn their way to God - or perhaps because we fear that this message will be unpopular. This can be a particular danger in China, where popular religions like Buddhism tend to be more about "what I can get out of religion", rather than submitting our own will under God's rule.

However, this passage teaches that repentance is essential to true faith, so we must not downplay the call to repentance, either in our own lives or in teaching others. This message may well be unpopular (just look at what happened to John!) - but remember the parable of the sower: the 'good soil' will listen to Jesus' message and bear fruit. Mark's Gospel makes it clear that it is impossible to earn our way to God by our actions, so there will be plenty of opportunities to emphasise this in passages such as 7:1-23 and 10:1-31.

➔ Responding to the passage

The following questions help us get into the detail and atmosphere of the passage, while also beginning to challenge us about our own response:

- **How does this passage help us understand what it means to repent?**

For example: it is not enough just to 'hear gladly' (20) - repentance requires action. How often do we feel challenged by God's word, but fail to act on what we've heard? Often repentance is costly and humiliating - Herod could have given up Herodias after hearing John preach in verse 18... but it was too costly. He could have protected John in verse 26... but he was too concerned to 'save face' in front of his guests.

- **How does this passage warn us against unrepentance?**

For example: our unrepentance can seem insignificant at first, but can quickly snowball into something devastating: Herod slowly listened to John, slowly thought about what John was saying - but then suddenly events overtook him and before he knew it he had beheaded John (note the repetition of words like 'immediately, at once' in 25-27). The serious consequences of unrepentance are suggested in verse 11.

This passage is likely to make all of us think of areas where we are in danger of being unrepentant like Herod - if appropriate, you could ask the group members to share some of the areas this passage has challenged them in. You could also have some examples ready as suggestions (e.g. idolatry of work/materialism/relationships...).

This is a natural point to think about pressures group members might face back in China: areas of unrepentance that seem insignificant now might suddenly snowball into something more serious when faced with the challenges of family and work life back home, perhaps without the support of good Christian friends. A case study such as the one below might help with this:

Case Study:

K spent a year studying in the UK, where she grew lots in her relationship with God. After returning home she started seeing a boy that her parents introduced her to - he wasn't a Christian, but he didn't mind her going to church. Some Christian friends warned her against dating a non-Christian, and K agrees that the Bible teaches she should marry a Christian - but she doesn't know many Christian men, and through dating this boy she might have opportunities to share the gospel with him.

*How does this passage help us understand the danger of K's position?
What advice would you give her?*

Mark 6:31-52 *Dining with the King*

Before you start...

Quotation/Allusion Tool: When Mark quotes or alludes to another part of the Bible, we should look up the original context of his quotation. What connection is Mark making?

What allusions to incidents from the Old Testament can you find in this passage? Have a look at Exodus 14 and 16 if you need some inspiration!

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

Believe Jesus really is the promised King

This passage can be read on two levels. Firstly, if we just read the narrative and don't consider any Old Testament background, we see that Jesus is full of compassion, perfectly in control, powerful over nature, able to provide and satisfy - these are all wonderful truths about King Jesus, which draw us to him and give us confidence to follow him (despite the opposition he and we will encounter - see the previous passage). However if we only consider this level we are left with some questions: Jesus has shown he is capable of bringing the dead to life, saving people from drowning, healing life-threatening illness, and much more besides - compared to those things, feeding 5000 people (who could have gone to the nearest village to buy bread) and walking on water (with the intention of passing by the disciples) seem like interesting choices of miracle. They are impressive stunts, but not really necessary. Why does Jesus do these things?

When we start to dig a bit deeper into the Old Testament events alluded to here, we can see that this is not merely a party trick, but a significant revelation of who Jesus is. There are allusions to various events here, but the most striking one is the Exodus: when God acted to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt back in 1500 BC. A quick look at the following passages shows us that Mark has deliberately peppered this passage with details which together point unmistakably to this foundational event in Israel's history:

- Exodus 16 - God miraculously provides bread from nothing
- Exodus 13:20, 15:22 - compare Mark 6:31, 32, 35
- Exodus 18:21, 25 - compare Mark 6:40
- Exodus 24:13 (etc) - God frequently meets Moses on a mountain in Exodus
- Exodus 14:13, 21, 22 - compare Mark 6:48, 50
- Exodus 33:22 - compare Mark 6:48
- Exodus 3:14 - God reveals his name as 'I am' - a literal translation of Jesus' words in Mark 6:50 reads "Take heart; I am"

The main lesson from Exodus is that God is the LORD who redeems his people from slavery. Therefore by reminding us of the Exodus, Mark is claiming that Jesus has come to fulfil these things: he is no less than the one true LORD, and he has come to redeem his people. What a claim! The reference on verse 34 to “sheep without a shepherd” also reminds us of God’s promise to send a king who would “shepherd” his people (see, for example, Ezekiel 34:23).

However, there is a sting at the end of this passage. Just like in 4:35-41 the disciples are in a boat looking stupid! Although they have just experienced Jesus’ mighty power in the feeding miracle, they are terrified when they see Jesus (remember 4:35-6:6 where fear is the typical wrong response to Jesus). Even worse, we are told they “did not understand” (the mark of an ‘outsider’, see 4:12) and “their hearts were hardened” - which sounds alarmingly like the Pharisees in 3:5. This serves to warn the reader against displaying similar unbelief.

➔ Communicating Mark’s purpose

Getting into the passage:

You could get into the passage by asking:

- **How might the disciples have been feeling in this section?**

There are lots of possible answers! This helps to bring out the colour of the narrative (and highlight the disciples’ wrong response).

How much you refer to the Old Testament background will depend on your group. With a more mature group who has some familiarity with the Old Testament it is a good idea to ask them to look at some of the Exodus references in advance so that they are ready to discuss them together. Perhaps choose one or two references to look at together as a group, and be ready to explain their significance if the group is unfamiliar with the background (e.g. that Exodus is about the LORD redeeming his people).

With a group of mostly non-Christians it might be more straightforward to focus on what we learn about Jesus through the basic narrative, and simply explain to them that the Old Testament references back up what we learn about Jesus here: he fulfills promises made by God centuries ago. You could choose one concept to explore in more detail (for example, the idea of Jesus as a shepherd, as it is straightforward to engage with the meaning of a shepherd: he feeds, protects, cares for the sheep). Using the Timeline (see Appendix) should help in explaining this.

Engaging with presuppositions:

Back in the first study we thought about how the idea of a king/ruler has negative connotations for many Chinese people. This passage not only shows us that Jesus is King, it also shows us that he is a GOOD King: kind, powerful, compassionate. It is worth spending time discussing this idea and thinking about how Jesus is so much more better than all human leaders who so often disappoint. Looking back to Herod could be a good starting point for making this comparison: you could ask:

- **How does King Jesus contrast with King Herod? How does King Jesus contrast with rulers today?**

You could ask a starter question to introduce this idea, for example:

- **What do you think makes a good ruler?**
- **If you were choosing the next leader of China, what qualities would you look for?**

➔ **Responding to the passage**

This passage is a chance to continue thinking about our response to who Jesus is, as we began to do in 4:35-6:6. Will we respond with hard-hearted unbelief like the disciples, or with faith that he is the promised King?

For non-Christian groups you could continue thinking about the idea of Jesus as King:

- **What sort of a King is Jesus?**
- **Why might you find it difficult to believe that Jesus is this King?**
- **How does this passage help you to believe?**

Those questions would work with Christians too, but you could take it further:

- **In what situations do we find ourselves doubting Jesus?**
You could consider some specific situations that returnees will face back home, perhaps building on discussions you began in the study on 4:35-6:6.
- **How will meditating on the Jesus of this passage give us confidence in these situations?**

Mark 6:53-7:23 *The Heart of the Problem*

Before you start...

In chapter 4 we introduced the **Repetition Tool**.

- Use it again here to identify important ideas that appear throughout the passage.
- How are these ideas connected to each other?

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

Understand: our hearts are dirty before God

In chapter 2 Jesus described himself as a doctor... and here we see his diagnosis of the human heart. It's not a pretty sight. First, Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees reveals the true nature of their hearts: they appear super-holy with all their washings and laws and traditions, but in fact they reject God's word. The example in v10-13 illustrates their use of religious traditions to cover up disobedience to God himself. Jesus' verdict on them is damning: they are "hypocrites" whose "heart is far from [God]".

Jesus then goes on to explain why the Pharisees' religious acts are so useless: defilement comes from our hearts, therefore outward actions completely miss the point. It's pointless to wash your hands if it's your heart that is dirty. He ends in verses 21-23 with a shockingly vivid portrayal of the filth that our hearts pour out.

In the context of chapters 4-8 this explanation is really significant. It explains why there are so many negative responses to Jesus, and shows us what we need Jesus to deliver us from: our own hearts. Even the disciples have this deep heart problem: we saw in 6:52 that their hearts are hardened, making clear that a defiled heart is a universal condition. Jesus' focus on "understanding" in verses 14-18 highlights this as the main response: do we really understand and believe the profound hopelessness of the human condition? We should end this passage feeling convicted of the evil in our own hearts and desperate to hear how Jesus intends to deal with it.

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

A starter question for this passage could be:

- **What sort of actions make a person very 'religious'?**

Many people will have in mind actions such as going to a temple to burn incense, or good deeds like giving money to charity. Identifying these things at the start of the study allows you to then revisit them at the end and discuss them in light of the passage.

The **Repetition Tool** could be used in the study to bring out the big ideas (*hearts, defiled, commandments, traditions*); you could also ask questions like:

- **How would you describe the Pharisees?**
- **What makes a person unclean according to: a) the Pharisees b) Jesus?**

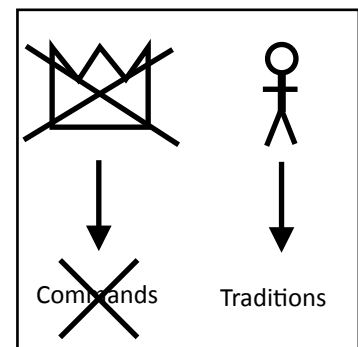
Be ready to explain what is meant by being “unclean” or “defiled”. You could describe it as being **dirty in God’s eyes**. To be “unclean” was very serious, as it meant that one was not in a good relationship with God.

Engaging with presuppositions:

In chapter 2 we discussed that sin is an unfamiliar concept in Chinese culture, which we need to explain clearly and carefully. This passage helps us understand what sin is and why it is so serious.

What is sin?

The Pharisees’ sin is displayed through their rejection of God’s word (verses 8, 9, 13). By rejecting God’s word they are offending and rejecting God himself. This picture helps to illustrate how the Pharisees reject God and his word (“commandments”) in favour of themselves and their own word (“traditions”). The language of “defiled” also helps us to understand sin: it means being horribly dirty in God’s eyes, which is a problem as God is perfectly pure and cannot stand evil.



Why is sin a serious problem?

Traditional Chinese philosophy is optimistic about the human heart - for centuries children grew up chanting the rhyme: “People at birth are basically good” (人之初 性本善). People are born pure, then polluted by external influences from society. This means that evil is typically viewed as a secondary problem: it is the result of something else, and if we tackle those other things (through education, for example) then we can make ourselves and our world a better place. However, Jesus emphasises here that our evil thoughts and actions cannot be blamed on our environment as they come from within us: we are not just people who do evil things, we are evil people. Jesus wants us to know that we need something more than education to solve the problem of our dirty hearts - and he wants us to keep reading Mark’s Gospel to find out what that solution is! The following questions could help to engage with these ideas:

- **Do you think that Jesus would say people are born good or evil?**
- **Why is education unable to solve the problem of human evil?**

Revisiting unanswered questions:

- **What does it mean to repent?** *To recognise that my own heart is dirty before God, and that religious actions cannot solve the problem.*

- **Why is Jesus' priority to forgive, not heal illness?** (see 2:1-12) *Our problem is deeper than physical illness - we have sinful hearts. By forgiving sin, Jesus tackles the root problem.*

➔ Responding to the passage

Mark's purpose is for us to *understand* the evil nature of our hearts, and so in our response we should reflect deeply on what Jesus is saying and let it challenge the way we naturally view ourselves and others. Here are some suggested questions, in addition to the ones given above:

To tie in with the starter question:

- **Think back to the religious actions we mentioned at the start.**
How much can they help us? Why?

They are useless, as they are merely external like the Pharisees' washing and do not tackle the real problem of our hearts. The following illustration helps explain this point:

Imagine that you are on the bus going to work, when suddenly the person next to you is sick all over you! What would you do?

... Would you pretend to ignore it, hoping that no one else will notice, and continue on your way to work? Of course not!

... Would you take out some perfume, spray it all over you to cover the smell, and continue on your way to work? Of course not!

... Rather, you would get off the bus, go home, have a shower (or two), change your clothes, and only then go to work.

So what will we do with our dirty hearts? Ignore them? Try to cover them up with some religious activity? Or will we realise that we need a drastic solution - a new heart?

- **Why do we find Jesus' diagnosis of the human heart hard to accept?**

- **Do we believe this about ourselves? What about our family and friends?**

Often we can think that we accept a truth like this, but when we start to consider the implications we realise that we have not yet really grasped it. We might agree that "the human heart is dirty before God" - but do I admit that my heart is dirty before God? ... that my parents' hearts are dirty before God? ... that my children's hearts are dirty before God? This might require us to examine ourselves in light of the next question:

- **How do you feel as you read verses 21-23?**

This is a very sobering list, and we can all recognise ourselves somewhere in it.

Mark 7:24-8:10 *All are Welcome*

Before you start...

Context Tool: Words come within sentences, sentences in paragraphs, paragraphs in chapters, chapters in sections... context is essential to understanding what Mark is saying

- Jesus feeding thousands of people with a few loaves and fish feels very familiar... Write down all the similarities between 8:1-10 and 6:33-44.

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

Understand: Jesus' kingdom is for all who have humble faith

Mark has chosen carefully which events from Jesus' life he includes in his Gospel, so at first glance it seems a bit strange that he includes 8:1-10 - he has already told us about an almost identical event in chapter 6! Why??

Considering **geographical markers** helps us here: the three events in this passage all take place in Gentile regions (Tyre and Sidon and the Decapolis, 7:24, 31). In Jesus' interaction with the woman in 7:24-30 her Gentile identity is emphasised, both in Mark's description of her ("the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth") and in Jesus' conversation with her (27-29). The Jews would have considered this thoroughly Gentile woman to be unclean and far from God - yet amazingly she demonstrates a right response to Jesus, coming to him with humility, faith and understanding. This is all the more astonishing following on from the previous passage where we saw the universal problem of our dirty hearts and started to question whether it was possible for anyone to respond rightly to Jesus. This woman is a ray of hope - but a surprising one, given her Gentile identity.

It is no coincidence that Jesus uses the metaphor of bread in his conversation with the woman (27,28): in 6:33-44 Jesus demonstrated through feeding a crowd with bread that he is the promised, redeeming King - the one that the Jews were waiting for. In 7:28 the Gentile woman begs to share in the blessing that Jesus came to bring the Jews - and he agrees (29-30). Then Jesus goes on to miraculously feed a Gentile crowd of 4000 just like he fed the Jewish crowd of 5000: the similarities between these two episodes are not accidental! Jesus is demonstrating that he has come as redeeming King for Gentiles as well as for Jews.

This builds on the 'insider/outsider' theme that was introduced in chapter 3, where we saw that Jesus' kingdom is not necessarily for the people we would expect. Although from 7:1-23 it would seem that everyone is ruled out of Jesus' kingdom by our hard hearts, here we see that the doors of the kingdom are flung open wide for anyone from any nation to enter, provided they respond

rightly to Jesus like the Syrophenician woman. This passage challenges our notions of who Jesus' kingdom is for, and encourages us to respond like the woman in humble recognition of our own utter unworthiness, coupled with a confident faith in Jesus.

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

You could introduce the 'insider/outsider' theme by asking:

- **After the last passage, who is 'in' Jesus' kingdom? Who is 'out'?**

This allows recap of context, and sets us up to be surprised that a Gentile woman is 'in'. You could revisit this question later on in the study, to show how this passage furthers our understanding of who is in and out.

This is another good place to get out a map and demonstrate that Jesus does all these things in Gentile regions. Make sure your group understands what is meant by a 'Jew' and a 'Gentile'!

Engaging with presuppositions:

1. Dogs??

Verse 27 can make us feel uncomfortable and think, "How can Jesus say such a thing?!" and "Why would Mark include such an offensive statement?!" But just like with Jesus' comments about his family (Mark 3:31-35), Mark wants to shock us for a reason, so we must engage with it and not gloss over it. This is a great place for really getting into the narrative and feeling what Mark wants us to feel - some questions that might help with this are:

- **How do you feel about what Jesus says to the woman in verse 27?**
- **How does the woman respond?**
- **How do you feel about her response?**
- **In what way is her response a model for us?**
- **How would you feel if Jesus said verse 27 to you?**

It is not polite to call someone a dog, and we cannot avoid that fact! But the reason this passage shocks us so much is that we instinctively think that we deserve something from Jesus; we have a right to be blessed by him, and it would be unfair of him to turn us away. However, Jesus makes clear to the woman that she has *no right* to share in his kingdom blessings because he is the Christ, the King promised to the Jews, and she is not a Jew. We are quite unfamiliar with that idea now, but the original reader would have understood that God's promises were to the Jews, leaving the Gentiles as 'outsiders'. Not only this, we saw in the previous passage that all people - Jews and Gentiles - have unclean hearts which cut us off from God, so this Syrophenician woman is doubly excluded from Jesus' kingdom, both by her ethnicity and by her sin.

Her response in verse 28 is a model of humble faith: she agrees with Jesus ("Yes, Lord, I am an undeserving dog"), but still persists in asking him to heal her daughter, content to receive even "crumbs" of blessing from him. How many of us would show such a realistic assessment of our own worth? And amazingly, despite her unworthiness, Jesus blesses her anyway! So rather than

feeling upset with Jesus for being so rude to the woman, we should marvel that Jesus chooses to pour out his blessing on her, even though she is a Gentile and a sinner. If we cannot accept Jesus' words here, we should question whether we are presumptuously taking inclusion in Jesus' kingdom for granted.

2. Outsiders

For the original reader it would have been a big deal to learn that Gentiles can enter Jesus' kingdom on the same terms as Jews. Christians now are very familiar with this idea - but still our actions and attitudes can reveal that we sometimes view our own people group as being extra special in God's eyes, while looking down on certain other people groups. Chinese culture has a strong sense of insiders and outsiders: people from my family, hometown, university, nation etc are 'insiders' (自己人), while people not in these groups can be viewed as 'outsiders' (外人). This passage poses a challenge to this worldview, particularly when it comes to sharing the gospel: we should all be challenged to consider whether we really believe that Jesus has come for all peoples, even Muslim minority groups in China (the Uighur and Hui), the Japanese, migrant workers, or whoever it might be that we are tempted to look down on and exclude. We could ask questions such as:

- **What people group do you think is most likely to become a Christian?**
- **Which people group would you be least willing to take the gospel to?**

➔ Responding to the passage

The questions in *Engaging with Presuppositions* highlight the major areas our worldview should change as we read this passage - it is one that calls for a deep change in our understanding, not just a change in our actions. Some more general questions that could be discussed are:

- **How should this passage impact life in an international city?**
- **How should this passage make us feel about ourselves?**

Mark 8:11-30 *Blind Eyes See*

Before you start...

Using the **Structure Tool** we can find another sandwich in this passage: Mark places the healing of the blind man (22-26) between two incidents with the disciples, inviting us to compare them.

- How does the blind man relate to the 'slices of bread' on either side?

➔ What is Mark's purpose?

Humbly marvel: Jesus grants faith to the helplessly blind

This passage contains the most amazing miracle so far in Mark's gospel: the blind, stupid disciples suddenly understand that Jesus is the Christ! Let's remind ourselves of the disciples' performance: in 4:35-41 they are rebuked for their fear and lack of faith in Jesus. In 6:45-52 they mistake Jesus for a ghost and are terrified again, displaying lack of understanding and hard hearts. This passage is the climax: they spectacularly miss Jesus' warning in 8:15 (the misunderstanding in verse 16 is almost comedy!) and Jesus responds with a stream of 8 rhetorical questions, full of frustration at their helpless ignorance. Mark draws our attention to these three incidents by pointing out that they all take place on a boat during a sea crossing.

This passage makes us look back and consider other people's responses to Jesus too: he warns the disciples against "the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod". The Pharisees and Herod have shown us how *not* to respond to Jesus: they display unrepentance, self-righteousness and a determination not to believe in Jesus (emphasised in 8:11-13). In contrast, we have met a number of 'miscellaneous characters' who respond rightly to Jesus with faith, humility and understanding (such as Jairus, the woman with bleeding and the Syrophenician woman). So in this passage we are wondering: "What about the disciples? Will they be like the Pharisees or the miscellaneous characters? Will they respond rightly to Jesus?" We know this is an important question, as response to Jesus determines whether or not someone can be in his kingdom.

In light of this, the disciples' lack of understanding in 8:14-21 is deeply depressing. The language Jesus uses to describe them is typical of the outsiders who do not believe, will not believe and cannot believe: they "do not perceive or understand", their "hearts are hardened", they "have eyes but do not see, have ears but do not hear" (i.e. they are blind and deaf). This language is used in 4:12 to describe the outsiders who cannot "turn and be forgiven". This is terrifying - if even the disciples are hopelessly blind to Jesus, what hope is there for any of us?

And so 8:29 is a delightful verse: suddenly Peter displays that he can see, hear, believe and understand that Jesus is the Christ! We know this is an important statement from the very first

verse of Mark's Gospel. But what transformed Peter from a hopeless unbeliever to a model of faith in Jesus?

The key is in the sandwich: in between verse 21 and verse 29 Jesus miraculously heals a blind man - with striking similarities to his healing of the deaf man in 7:31-37. Just as Jesus miraculously gives physical hearing and sight, so he miraculously gives spiritual hearing and sight to his disciples. Without Jesus' intervention we are all hopeless outsiders to his kingdom, but he delights to give the gift of faith to people. Jesus' two-stage healing of the blind man displays that Peter' has not yet been given complete understanding - but we will see more of that in the next passage. Here, the appropriate response is to marvel at Jesus' precious gift of faith.

➔ Communicating Mark's purpose

Getting into the passage:

This passage brings together many themes from earlier chapters in Mark's Gospel, building on what we have seen about who Jesus is and how people respond to him. Think about how to recap the relevant incidents without making the study dry or confusing; for example you could split the group in two, with half of them looking back through the section (from 4:35) to discuss **What good responses do we see?** and the other half discussing **What bad responses do we see?** Then they could compare the disciples to these two groups.

As with so many passages in Mark, this one is full of emotion: the shocking hard-heartedness of the Pharisees, the terrifying blindness of the disciples, and the wonderful relief of Peter's faith in Jesus. Try to help the group feel the impact of this.

Engaging with presuppositions:

In the previous passage we saw the importance of humility as Jesus challenged us to admit that we are as undeserving as dogs. This passage calls for even more humility: we are to identify with the disciples who were so hopelessly blind to the truth that they could do nothing to save themselves. Many of our Chinese friends will have been told since childhood to "trust in yourself": there are so many opportunities in China to make money and rise to the top, if only you work hard and believe you can do it. Admitting one's own inadequacy and asking for help are often viewed negatively as signs of weakness.

This passage challenges the attitude of "I believe in myself". Non-Christians need to recognise that becoming a Christian means admitting our helplessness and depending on Jesus. Asking them:

- **What do you think would need to change for you to become a Christian?**

could reveal whether they are willing to ask Jesus to give them faith, or if they think that being a Christian is a matter of trying hard to be good.

For Christians, this passage humbles us if we feel at all pleased with ourselves for having understood the gospel and "worked out" that Jesus is the Christ - we only have this understanding because we have been given it. This question could help both Christians and non-Christians to think more about this idea:

- **Why might this passage be difficult to accept for someone who has always been told: “trust in yourself and you can achieve your goals”?**

➔ Responding to the passage

It is tempting (especially with unbelievers) to push “believe that Jesus is the Christ” as the main application from this passage. Of course Mark wants us to believe this - but in *this passage* his purpose is for us to know that Jesus miraculously gives the gift of faith. This has various implications:

- **Gratitude:** This passage deepens our awareness of how much God has done for us and makes us want to praise him: even our faith is a gift from him.

- **Humility** (see above) Also, this passage should prevent us from looking down on non-Christians and feeling superior because we trust Jesus. Our faith was given to us by Jesus - there is nothing for us to be proud of.

- **Sharing our testimony:** Often the way we talk about how we became a Christian reveals who we think is responsible for our faith: sometimes our testimonies focus on what *I* did, how *I* realised the importance of Jesus, how *I* decided that he would be good for my life, how much *I* changed. This passage makes clear that only Jesus deserves credit for us coming to faith, and we should seek to honour him alone as we share our testimony. As a starter question you could ask group members to share their testimonies with each other, then at the end of the study ask them how they think what they’ve learnt in this passage should impact the way they share their testimony. Getting familiar with the idea of sharing their testimony will also help prepare them to witness to others when they return to China.

- **Ministry:** Sometimes it is tempting to despair when we share the gospel with someone but they just don’t seem to understand. We can think that we’re not good enough to persuade them, or that they are just too hardened to God so there is no hope for them. This passage should give us confidence: Jesus grants people faith, so no one is too far off to be saved. It reminds us of the importance of prayer: we should ask God to work a miracle of faith in people’s hearts.

You could use the hymn “Amazing Grace” to help you respond in praise to God for his gift of faith!

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound	奇异恩典何等甘甜
That saved a wretch like me.	我罪已得赦免
I once was lost, but now am found,	前我失丧今被寻回
Was blind, but now I see.	瞎眼今得看见

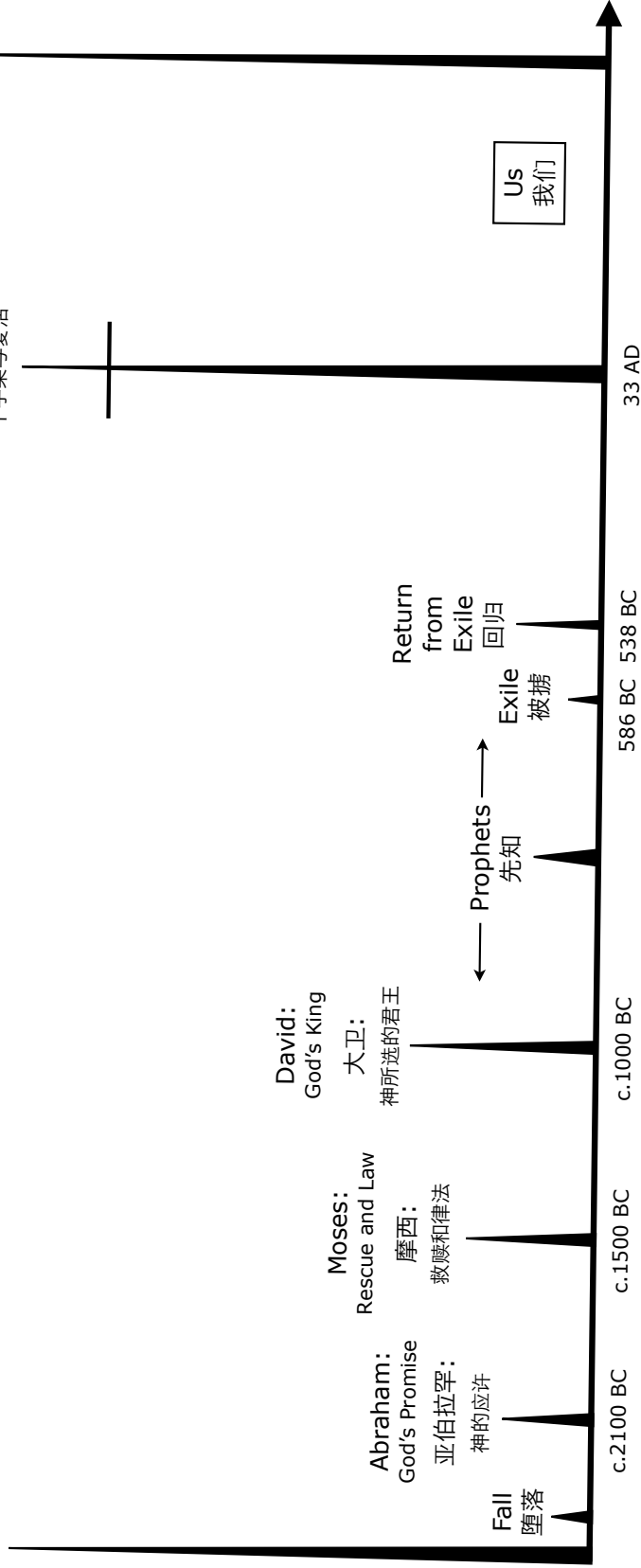
Appendix: Bible Timeline

Bible Timeline 圣经总览

Jesus' Return and
New Creation
耶稣的再来和新天地

Jesus:
Cross and Resurrection
耶稣:
十字架与复活

Creation
创世



33 AD

586 BC 538 BC

c.1000 BC

c.1500 BC

c.2100 BC

Chinese Dynasties 中国朝代	夏朝 Xia C.2070 – 1600 BC	商朝 Shang C.1600 – 1046 BC	西周 1046 – 771 BC	春秋 771 – 403 BC	战国 Warring States Period 403 – 221 BC
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