Introduction
We have seen that as soon as Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah the book of Mark shifts its focus from the person of Christ to the work of Christ. Now that we know who he is — what did he come to do? In the passage before us we have Jesus’ third attempt to teach his disciples the meaning of his death. (The first two were in 8:31-32 and 9:31-32.) This time, Jesus gives us more details about his death than previously. But the major advance for the reader is that, for the first time, we are told not just that he will die but why he will do so. Here he begins to explain the meaning and purpose of his death. Many believe that 10:45 is the key verse of the entire gospel, summarizing and combining all the Mark themes about who Jesus is and what he came to do.

Discussion Questions

1. Compare 10:32 to 9:31 and 8:31. What new details and concepts does Jesus add to this teaching about his death?

a) For the first time, we are told that his death will be in Jerusalem.
b) For the first time, we see that both Jews and Gentiles specifically will reject him. 8:31 speaks only of the Jewish religious leaders, and 9:31 speaks more generally about being delivered into the hands of “men.” But here for the first time Jesus shows us that it is not the Jews only who will attack him. This subverts the effort to use the gospels for anti-Semitic purposes.
c) A key difference is the word “condemn.” In 8:31, Jesus says he would be rejected by the priests and scribes, but in 10:32, they will also “condemn him to death.” This is a legal word that indicates he will be tried and executed by a court, not simply murdered by a private person or party. But the word “betrayed” at least hints that he will die for crimes he didn’t commit. Jesus will then be a victim of injustice.
d) Another difference has to do with humiliation. They will “mock… spit… flog” him (v. 34). This adds that Jesus will experience the public humiliation that a criminal received in public Roman executions.

In general, the new information shows that there will be a decidedly judicial character to his death. It means that he will be tried, found guilty, and punished for crimes. These three verses still do not explain why this death must occur, and why it must occur in a judicial manner.

The three-fold repetition of this prediction (in just three chapters) shows that his death was not accidental nor incidental to his mission. Rather, it was planned and was absolutely central to both his identity and his purpose on earth.
2. a) How does the question (v.35) and the request (v. 37) of James and John show that they still don’t understand the meaning of the cross, of “glory” and of “greatness”? b) What does James and John’s request — and Jesus’ response — teach us about prayer?

a) The question of greatness
The request shows that James and John clearly had no idea at all of what Jesus was really in for. They didn’t see that Jesus’ highest “glory” was going to be the courage, humility, and wisdom of his suffering and death. If they knew that Jesus’ destiny was misery and suffering, they would never have been asking for a bigger slice of it! Their question shows that they understood “glory” and “greatness” to be power rather than suffering and service. They don’t understand how submitting oneself in service (even to the point of suffering) is the way God leads to triumph. They breathe a whole different spirit than Jesus — cf. their question in v. 35 (i.e. “we want you to serve us”) to Jesus’ spirit v. 45 (i.e. “I have come to serve you”).

Jesus continues in v. 42-44 to turn the pagan notion of greatness on its head. In the world, the greater you are, the more people serve you (maids, butlers, groundskeepers, chauffeurs, cooks, etc. OR employees, underlings). But in Jesus’ kingdom, the greater you are, the more people you serve.

b) Prayer
The approach to Jesus in vv. 35ff. is instructive when we apply it to our prayer life. James and John want Jesus to say “yes” before they ask their question. This is a distortion of true prayer. True prayer seeks to mold our will to God’s, not God’s will to ours. This does not mean that we cannot ask God for justice (“thy kingdom come… on earth as it is in heaven”) and our needs (“give us this day our daily bread”), but we always do so with the over-arching awareness of our limited wisdom (“thy will be done”) Jesus shows us true prayer in the garden (e.g. “Take this… Yet not what I will, but what you will.” – 14:34). The cross shows us that Jesus lived to the Father’s will, and died to his own. The natural bent of the human heart is to use God as a need-meeter. Any person who only sticks with Christianity as long as things are going his or her way, is a stranger to the cross.

This incident does not only remind us of how we should pray with humility and openness to God, but we should also live in the same way. Mark may be playing up the irony of James and John’s question by including the term “at your right… at your left” (v. 37). There were two men at the right and left hand of Jesus at the climax of his career — the two thieves crucified beside him!! Thus James and John have no idea what they are asking.

Mark’s vision of the moral life is profoundly ironic. Because God’s manner of revelation is characterized by… reversal and surprise, those who follow Jesus find themselves repeatedly failing to understand the will of God… [Thus] there can be no place for smugness or dogmatism in ethical matters. Those who think they have the matter firmly in hand are those who suffer from hardness of heart (3:1-6, 7:1-23). If our sensibilities are formed by this narrative, we will learn not to take ourselves too seriously; we will be self-critical and receptive to unexpected manifestations of God’s love and power. (R. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 90).
It is easy to laugh at how clueless the disciples are, but instead we should be asking: “What are we missing, right now? In what ways are we being blind to how God is working now?” God loves to confound the world, taking what it thinks is weak and using it to bring the world to its knees (cf. I Corinthians 1:26-29). Before us is a very case in point: this rag-tag Messiah, with only 12 assorted illiterates and fishermen as followers, gets executed as a criminal, and permanently shapes the rest of the course of civilization! If this is how God always works in our lives, we should always be humble and open in our attitude toward life. We should avoid the smugness of worry (!) You only worry if you are totally sure how life must go. We should avoid the smugness of being doctrinaire, proud, sure of ourselves.

3. a) What are the “cup” and the “baptism”? Read Is.41:17-23. b) To what degree do we share in them with Jesus?

a) What are the cup and the baptism?
First, the cup and the baptism refer to the fact that Jesus is going to bear the wrath of God on the cross. Both the “cup” and the “baptism” in the Old Testament refer to ordeals and suffering. The “cup” in the language of the prophets refers specifically to the wrath and justice of God against sin. Cf. Isaiah 51:17-23 (“the cup of his wrath… the goblet that makes men stagger”) and Jeremiah 25:15-17 (“take from my hand the cup filled with the wine of my wrath… when they drink it, they will stagger and go mad”) or Ezekiel 23:28-34 (“you will drink it and drain it dry… and tear your breasts”). It is very interesting that Jesus mentions “the cup” just after he teaches for the first time that his death will be a judicial one (see #1 above). The “cup” is the just wrath of God the judge on human evil. Jesus will also be judged by a court and receive “judicial wrath”. For the first time we have a hint that the human judicial condemnation will be a reflection of a the divine judicial condemnation.

“Baptism” means to be flooded with something. Baptism, of course, can have a very positive meaning! But because Jesus pairs the “baptism” with the “cup”, it surely has a negative connotation here. The great flood of Noah (Genesis 6) was a sign of God’s wrath on the world. To be overwhelmed and submerged by a flood is a sign of judgment (cf. Psalm 69:2,15). But “baptism”, unlike the image of “cup” contains an aspect of hope. Baptism means to pass through an ordeal. A baptism is to go under the waters and emerge again. Thus Romans 6:3-4 tell us baptism is like a death and resurrection. I Corinthians 10:1-2 tells us that when the Israelites passed into the Red Sea they were “baptized,” and, though it was an ordeal, they emerged again. So likely this is a hint that the terrible death of Jesus would result in resurrection.

b) To what extent do we share in them?
James and John say (so cluelessly) that they can share in the cup and baptism of Christ (v. 39). Jesus’ response to them is somewhat ambiguous, since we both do and yet don’t share them with Jesus.

When Jesus first asks James and John if they can take his cup and baptism (v. 38) he seems to imply that what they ask is impossible. “You don’t know what you are asking” he says. “Can you drink the cup I drink…” The question seems quite rhetorical, meaning that no other could possibly experience what he was going to experience. Then to our surprise, Jesus tells them that “you will” (v. 39) get his cup and baptism.
How are we to read this? 1) On the one hand, obviously we could not bear the actual cup of God’s judicial wrath. That would have simply destroyed us. That is the very thing that Jesus came to avoid! He came to take the cup so that we did not have to. (See the next question). 2) On the other hand, to follow Jesus is to become servants and to suffer. Our lives will be conformed to his. That has been the burden of each of the three times Jesus has tried to teach the meaning of his death. Jesus has told us we too will “take up our cross” (8:34; 9:35-37). He says: “I am the kind of Messiah that wins through losing power and serving others. If you are my followers, your lives will follow this pattern.” In summary, it means that if we assume his life style, serving others instead of seeking to dominate and control them, we will also pay large costs, perhaps even death. [We know James was executed for his faith and John exiled for his.] In addition, there is perhaps the indication that, just as his baptism led to glory, so the “mini-death” of our service and baptism will lead us to glory, too.

4. Read v. 45. What is Jesus saying about his death (especially when he calls it a “ransom”) that he has not told us before?

In this statement we are finally given insight into the purpose and reason for Jesus’ death — i.e. why he had to die and what his death actually accomplished.

a) First, the term “come” is rather important. It is a strong hint that Jesus existed before he was born. He came into the world. By saying, “did not come to be served” he assumes that he had every right to expect to be honored and served when he came, though he did not exercise that privilege. In short, the term “did not come to be served” quietly presupposes a truth of staggering proportions. Jesus is saying that he is a pre-existing divine being who came to earth.

b) Second, the word ransom is often translated “redeem” in English translations. But “ransom” (the Greek word lutron) is a much better translation, because even today it has a set of meanings associated with the liberation from captivity through a payment. In those days, however, “ransom” did not usually mean to pay kidnappers (as it does today), but to purchase a person out of slavery. “The word [lutron] took its origin from the practices of warfare, where it was the price paid to bring a prisoner of war out of his captivity.” (L. Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew, p. 512). The implications of this word are all-important.

(1) First, the word “ransom” assumes that we are in captivity and bondage. This tells us a lot about how Jesus sees our spiritual condition. If we survey what the rest of the Bible tells us about this, we can say that we are in bondage to sin, to death, and to the Law (at least). These are “forces” that hold us captive, that we cannot escape on our own.

(2) Second, the word assumes that there is a price or a penalty to be paid in order to release the slaves. There are some commentators who say that the word lutron only means to release a person from captivity (i.e. to “spring” them — opening their cell doors, unlocking their chains, as it were.) But careful study of the word in the Bible shows that it means not only to release, but to release through payment. Someone must bear a cost. The meaning of lutron as “payment” is nearly assured by the little Greek word “anti” (“for”) that Jesus uses when he says that he came to give his life (“a ransom for many”). The word normal force of this preposition is “in the stead
of.” It means exchange, substitution. Under any rendering of the word, it means that what happened to Jesus would have otherwise had to happen to the many.

(3) Third, the verse tells us the size of the ransom-price or payment. “Give his life a ransom for many.” Jesus did not pay a quantifiable, finite sum. It was his whole life for ours. It was a complete substitution. To put it vividly: the very same dark forces that held us took hold of him instead. He experienced everything from the law, sin, death, and hell that we have or would have experienced. The ransomer experiences poverty and loss so the slave can experience plenty and freedom. The ransomer does that which the slave is incapable of doing or supplementing. It is all born by the ransomer. cf. Acts 20:28 “he purchased the church of God with his own blood” or 2 Corinthians 5:21 “he became sin who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

(4) Fourth, the word “many” is probably a direct reference to the famous Suffering Servant who is depicted in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 as being “pierced for our transgressions.” By his suffering “my servant will justify many, he will bear their iniquities.”(Isaiah 53:11). It is most likely that Jesus is claiming here to do the work of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, and thus 10:45 is a very, very compressed summary of that whole chapter. To understand what Jesus means as “give his life a ransom for…” you have to read the whole passage of Isaiah.

(5) Fifth, the word “ransom” implies that a new relationship is formed with the ransomer. Ordinarily, the liberated slave now “owes” the liberator his or her life, and so a new relationship of love and grateful, willing service begins. In a sense, the former captive is now a “captive of love.” cf. I Corinthians 6:19 “you are not your own, you were bought with a price” and John 8:31-32 “if you hold to my teaching… you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” cf. also the old Book of Common Prayer: “whose service is perfect freedom.”

In summary, Jesus tells us that he came as a substitute for us. There are many who object to the concept that Jesus died as our substitute because of its implications that God is an angry God who has to be appeased with blood. This sounds too much like the bloodthirsty gods of antiquity who demanded human sacrifice to feel properly honored. But that is to miss the point that the gospel teaches the self substitution of God. This is not human beings trying to appease a begrudging, unwilling god, but the Lord himself coming and voluntarily putting forth himself as the substitutionary payment. That is the very opposite of the blood-thirsty gods of primitive religion.

On the other hand, this teaching on the death of Christ does assume there is real evil and real guilt and real divine, transcendent justice. While ancient people did not understand the grace and love of God, modern people do not grasp the justice and holiness of God. Jesus’ death therefore was necessary. Otherwise, it would have been completely wrong. It is a) pointless or b) wicked to sacrifice your life unless it is absolutely necessary to save another. For example, if someone said, “Let me show you how much I love you” and threw themselves off a bridge, no one would feel very loved! You’d think the person was crazy. However, if they died as they rescued someone from drowning, then their sacrifice would be a loving, coherent one. In the same way, Jesus’ death is senseless unless we were truly and hopelessly lost, in the grip of sin and death.
So the substitutionary death of Christ challenges both ancient and modern views of God and the moral order. Modern people don’t believe in the depth and reality of spiritual evil and guilt — they don’t see that the holy justice of God must be honored. On the other hand, ancient people had no concept of a God so loving and gracious that he would come and make the perfect payment himself:

Of course, there is still much that is mysterious about this “wonderful exchange”, and no one particular metaphor, such as “ransom” or “bought” can convey it. The metaphors of the courtroom (“justified,” “made righteous”), of the temple (“sacrifice,” “offering”), of the battlefield (“triumphing over them on the cross”), and of relationship (“reconciled,” “propitiated”) are also used to fill out and enrich our understanding of what Jesus did for us. But the basic idea in all of them is substitution. John Calvin says he took “what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace?” (Institutes 2.12.2) John Stott wrote: “The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man... puts himself where God deserves to be; God... puts himself where man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.” (Stott, The Cross, p. 160). “God presented him as a sacrifice... so as to be both Just and Justifier of those who believe.” (Romans 3:25-26)

5. Read Isaiah 53:2-12. If, as is likely, Jesus had this prophecy in mind, what else did he believe about his impending death?

a) This passage makes clear the implication in Jesus’ use of the word “cup” to describe his death in 10:38. Here he shows that the suffering he was to suffer was more than earthly, temporal, and physical. On the cross he somehow was to experience the rejection and wrath and blows of God. He was stricken by God – Isaiah 53:4.

b) This passage makes even more explicit the substitutionary character of his death, which was implied in the word “ransom.” In Isaiah, we are told, first of all, that Jesus was not a sinner who needed to pay for his own sins. He was “numbered among the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12) — he was not himself a transgressor. It also shows that he was treated legally as if he were a sinner. He stood in our place, as it were, in the dock. “The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6)

c) Lastly, this passage spells out the effects of his death. It removes guilt (Isaiah 53:10), brings peace (Isaiah 53:5), and brings justification (Isaiah 53:11). He will justify many, putting them right with God.

6. What is Jesus saying about us when he says he dies to ransom us? (Follow-up question: in what ways are we “in bondage”?)

The word “ransom” means that the person being ransomed is not free. A ransom is the money paid to release someone from slavery or captivity. When Jesus said that his death pays a ransom for us, he is automatically saying that human beings are in captivity. cf. John 8:34 “anyone who
commits sin is a slave of sin.” He is saying that the people he is dying for are in a state of bondage, not simply guilt. It means we are like hostages on a hijacked aircraft — not destroyed yet, but under captivity and in mortal danger. The only way for us to get out was to die on the cross. This assumes that we are in bondage or slavery to bad masters. Admittedly, most people do not feel like sinners at all, let alone “slaves of sin.” But no one is more enslaved than the person who is not even aware that he or she is in bondage! So the fact that most people do not feel enslaved by sin only shows the depth of the problem. What are the “bad masters” to whom human beings are enslaved, according to the Bible?

a) Sin itself. John 8:34 – anyone who sins is a slave to sin. Becky Pippert: “Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she seeks to please. You do not control yourselves — you are controlled by the lord of your life.”

b) The Law. Galatians 5:18; Romans 6:14. What does Paul mean when he says we are all enslaved to the law? Objectively, we are guilty, under the law’s condemnation, because we break the moral law. Subjectively, we are guilt-ridden and anxious, even those of us who are not religious, because we know at some deep level that we should be perfect.

7. Read v.45. Despite the theological depth of Jesus’ statement, his use of it is extremely practical. How is he using the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement in the lives of his disciples?

Jesus is not giving them a theological lecture. Rather he is questioning their whole concept of success, power, and greatness. Jesus brings out this summary of his atoning death to subvert the world-view of the time.

With the rise of Caesar Augustus as ruler, Rome was unified not only by one emperor but also by a political order based on the ethics of patronage. Augustus assumed the role of benefactor or patron for all of the Roman world… Slaves were indebted to their masters, sons to their fathers. Clients were bound to their patrons and often had clients of their own. The resulting network of overlapping obligation was spun like a web throughout the Empire, with everyone ultimately indebted to the emperor… and with the emperor having a client status with the gods themselves, a recipient of their patronage and their special agent…

…Against such a world order, Jesus’ message stands in stark contrast… He insisted that status in the community must be measured [not by who owed you but] by one’s role as a servant… Service was expected [only] when dealing with people of higher status, but Jesus communicated… that service was to be given to those of lower status, even little children… In this way, Jesus opposed the Roman order at the most fundamental level, substituting for a pervasive worldview grounded in debt and obligation… in the favor of the gods, a way of being in the world that took as its starting point the beneficence of God… The narrative context of the ransom saying in both Matthew and Mark features a bid for recognition and honor, in the form of requests for the two primary seats of honor.” (Green and Baker, Recovering the Scandal of the Cross, pp. 39-40)
James and John had a world-view in which every person earned one’s status by serving superiors and getting them to reward you by putting you over inferiors who in turn had to serve you. Jesus turns this upside down. He says, “I come as one who serves my inferiors, in sheer free mercy and grace. In turn, they serve others. The ultimate example of this is in my death.”

**Summary**

**Who Jesus is:** Jesus is Redeemer King, son of Man and Son of David. Unlike the Gentile ‘kings’ Jesus really is Lord and has all authority. But his Kingship is demonstrated in ‘littleness’; he is also the Suffering Servant (Is 52-53) and the substitutionary sacrifice (Ex 12 and Lev 16), the ransom by which we are redeemed.

**Why Jesus Came:** God says Jesus must die for our sins. Our sin is serious; we cannot save ourselves. Now we learn that Jesus came not only to preach and call sinners, but to die for our death, the price of rescue from hell.

**How should I respond?** Since Mark 8:32, the twelve have consistently failed to accept the necessity of the cross and have failed to accept the truth about themselves. In this passage, they at last come empty-handed, but do not see that even this is not enough. We can do nothing but God must do something. Sin is so serious that the divine Son of Man came to die in our place to save us. When we grasp that, our ideas of greatness will be turned on their heads.