

6. The Passion Predicted

Biblical material: Mark 7:24–9:13.

Quotes:

... the four gospels are *completely* fictional... Why in the world would any rational person imagine that any of these fables were in any sense *true*? ... Certainly Mark, and later the other gospel writers, had no shortage of inspiration. What they didn't have is anyone who was in any sense "real." *Don Havis*, "Jesus Never Was."

Introductory questions

Why did Jesus appear reluctant to perform a miracle for the Syro-Phoenician woman? Why did Jesus, in essence, indicate that she was "a dog"? Why did Jesus perform the miracle of the feeding of the 4,000? Wasn't the 5,000 enough? Why were the leftovers important? Why did Jesus ask who people said he was? Why did he rebuke Peter? What was the transfiguration for?

Discussion ideas

Who is this Jesus? Mark continues this essential question, providing incidents and teaching from Jesus' life to answer the question. The miracle of healing the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman made it clear that Jesus did not come to his own people alone, and that even asking for the crumbs is enough!

After the healing of the deaf and dumb man, once again Jesus tells them not to publicize the event. Evidently he was not interested in gaining any kind of celebrity status—he just wanted to help those who suffered. But again the people are "amazed" and attracted by the miraculous. Jesus' decision to feed the 4,000 crowd was not motivated by the desire to perform miracles, but simply to feed the hungry, concerned they would collapse on the way home. Once more the true character of God is revealed—not wanting to awe or amaze, simply to help the helpless.

Missing the point. Immediately after the feeding of the 4,000, the Pharisees come and ask for a sign! No wonder Jesus "sighs deeply" and responds as he does, since the desire for the miraculous says much about such religious leaders. He also warns his disciples, who also miss the point entirely. Jesus then reminds them about the leftovers from the two miraculous meals—a telling point, revealing that even the remains would be enough for many meals! How quick we are to forget what God does...

Jesus asks his disciples the essential question—who do people think he is? He follows that general question up with one that is far more personal—who do *you* think I am? Peter's response is at first correct, but when Jesus explains the nature of this "Christ," Peter objects.

The transfiguration on the mountain—what is this "for"? Is it to confirm Jesus' divinity for himself, or is it for the disciples? And if so, why not make a show for all the disciples? What does this tell us about God and his attitudes, his nature and his character?

Right after this, the religious leaders are still quibbling—about whether Jesus really can be the Christ if Elijah has not come first. John the Baptist has of course fulfilled that role, and they also do not know that Elijah himself has just appeared to confirm Jesus before the disciples. So why not force the Pharisees to believe by miraculous show or compelling argument? Jesus only points them back to Scripture, to remind them of the true nature of the promised Messiah...

Ellen White Comments

During His stay in this region, He [Jesus] endeavored to withdraw from teaching the people, and to devote Himself more fully to His disciples. He was about to tell them of the suffering that awaited Him. But first He went away alone, and prayed that their hearts might be prepared to receive His words. Upon joining them, He did not at once communicate that which He desired to impart. Before doing this, He gave them an opportunity of confessing their faith in Him that they might be strengthened for the coming trial. He asked, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” {DA 411 }

After Peter’s confession, Jesus charged the disciples to tell no man that He was the Christ. This charge was given because of the determined opposition of the scribes and Pharisees. More than this, the people, and even the disciples, had so false a conception of the Messiah that a public announcement of Him would give them no true idea of His character or His work. But day by day He was revealing Himself to them as the Saviour, and thus He desired to give them a true conception of Him as the Messiah. The disciples still expected Christ to reign as a temporal prince. Although He had so long concealed His design, they believed that He would not always remain in poverty and obscurity; the time was near when He would establish His kingdom. That the hatred of the priests and rabbis would never be overcome, that Christ would be rejected by His own nation, condemned as a deceiver, and crucified as a malefactor,—such a thought the disciples had never entertained. But the hour of the power of darkness was drawing on, and Jesus must open to His disciples the conflict before them. He was sad as He anticipated the trial. {DA 415 }

Extra material

It’s not that I’m distrustful, but once I did stay up until midnight to check that my new digital watch did read 0:00! Sometimes it is hard to trust. I’m the kind of person that peeks around the refrigerator door as it’s closing to make sure the light goes out. When Jesus said to his disciples “Come, follow me,” I’d’ve asked for references...

Who was this Jesus? As people began to follow him, what did they see? They saw the spirit descend upon him as a dove at his baptism by John, and his face shine with glory. Yet here he was, a peasant man among men, who despite his words and actions, did not fit their picture of the royal Messiah.

Some *were* convinced. Andrew went to find his brother, Simon Peter, and announced that “We have found the Messiah...the Christ.” John too, was sure: “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”(John 1:41; 14 NIV.)

The burning question remained debated all through Jesus’ life. He was asked for his identity: “Who are you? Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah? Are you that prophet (Moses)?” (see John 1:19-21).

Jesus wanted people to ask such questions. For the question of who he was had the greatest significance. Only as he was recognized as God incarnate could he be the means of communicating God’s message and demonstrating the real character of God to the world. He even prompted his disciples by asking *them* who they (and the people) thought he was. (Mk. 8:27, 29).

The Pharisees would not accept the person and character of Jesus. They would not believe his words or his healing miracles. They wanted a supernatural sign—and came and asked Jesus for it (Mk. 8:11); demonstrating the kind of God they believed in!

But Peter expressed his trusting faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Although far from understanding the God as revealed in Jesus, the disciples were ready to accept Jesus as God himself. Immediately after this fact is established, this question answered, Jesus then shows the *kind* of person God really is: “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” (Mk. 8:31 NIV).

A whole process of “re-education” as to God’s true nature: coming as the suffering servant of all humanity. But Peter didn’t want to believe it! This was not his idea of the future of his Lord. He rebuked Jesus. To which Jesus replied ““Get behind me, Satan!” (Mk. 8:33 NIV)—for Peter spoke for the Devil. The Devil’s temptation was to suggest that Jesus act out of character, and to try to make sure that God’s true nature was not demonstrated to the world. But it was for that very reason that Jesus came!

7. Teaching the Disciples

Biblical material: Mark 9:14–10:31.

Quotes:

- The Devil has had a field day with the prejudicial assumption that you have to be some sort of moron to swallow Christianity.... Far from being in conflict, Christian faith goes hand in hand with reason, common sense, and historical fact. *Cliff Richard*
- In the Scriptures there is a portrait of God, but in Christ there is God himself. A coin bears the image of Caesar, but Caesar's son is his own lively resemblance. Christ is the living Bible. *Author unknown*
- Christ's statements are either cosmic or comic. *John Blanchard*

Introductory questions

Why did the disciples need to pray more to heal the demon-possessed boy? Is it a question of following some “exorcism prayer schedule”? Why is the discussion on who is the greatest so important? What about the children—what was Jesus trying to say here? Did Jesus side-step the divorce question? What about the rich young ruler—what was the problem?

Discussion ideas

The urgency of those with physical needs for healing was crowding out the time Jesus had to teach his disciples. After the incident with the demon-possessed boy, the disciples clearly needed more time with their Master, so Jesus seeks to avoid the crowds. He wants to prepare his disciples for his coming death, to explain its meaning and purpose. But though they listen, they clearly do not understand, and are afraid even to ask.

Instead they argue about who of them is the greatest. Such a concept is so far from God's way of running his universe that Jesus has to step in and confront such an attitude. He acts the divine position—by taking a child in his arms. Children are not normally viewed as being important members of society, but Jesus turns such ideas on their heads and makes it clear that social status, wealth and position mean nothing in God's kingdom.

He then speaks of God's inclusiveness—and that just because someone is not part of the “authorized” group of disciples does not bar them from being for God. (Many implications to such a comment!). He points again to the children, condemning those who cause the children to stumble. Such a positive attitude to children brings them running to him, to the consternation of the disciples who rebuke them. After all, there are heavy theological issues to discuss! But Jesus will have none of it, and exemplifies God in his treatment of the children.

The Pharisees just want to catch Jesus out, and so pose the divorce question—always a good topic for causing dissent... The rich young ruler is enthusiastic, but goes away disappointed, for he too does not understand the values of the Kingdom. Jesus' comment on how hard it is for the rich to enter amazes the disciples, who follow the usual philosophy that the rich must be specially blest by God. Not so, says Jesus—in fact, quite the opposite, maybe. He inverts the whole value system, and concludes by affirming that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

In all these incidents, see how what Jesus says and does vindicates the values of God's Kingdom and the true nature and character of its King!

Ellen White Comments

It was not enough for the disciples of Jesus to be instructed as to the nature of His kingdom. What they needed was a change of heart that would bring them into harmony with its principles. Calling a little child to Him, Jesus set him in the midst of them; then tenderly folding the little one in His arms He said, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." The simplicity, the self-forgetfulness, and the confiding love of a little child are the attributes that Heaven values. These are the characteristics of real greatness. {DA 437}

It is when the vital principles of the kingdom of God are lost sight of, that ceremonies become multitudinous and extravagant. It is when the character building is neglected, when the adornment of the soul is lacking, when the simplicity of godliness is despised, that pride and love of display demand magnificent church edifices, splendid adornings, and imposing ceremonials. But in all this God is not honored. He values His church, not for its external advantages, but for the sincere piety which distinguishes it from the world. {PK 565}

Extra Material

Questions. The disciples had a problem. If they were faced with God, they fell down like dead men—as did Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration. Overwhelmed and terrified, they were in no state to ask questions. They heard the voice from heaven confirming the reality and trustworthiness of Jesus, but right then and there they had nothing to say. Nothing to ask.

Then they spoke with Jesus. They *kind of* knew him. They *kind of* believed he was special—after all they'd seen enough amazing miracles. They *kind of* realized his divinity. Peter had called him the Christ of God. They had heard him speak of the Father, and of his mission to reveal God to the world. But it wasn't enough. They wanted the real God, not just this very human-looking Jesus who walked and talked and ate and slept just as they did.

So they asked him questions. Think of all the questions Jesus was asked. He really did invite questions: suggested lines of questioning, ways of asking. He was no pompous egotist who was offended at being questioned. God as Jesus wanted to answer all mankind's questions. Think of Thomas asking where Jesus was going, Philip wanting Jesus to show them the Father, of John the Baptist wondering whether Jesus was really the Messiah.

Jesus invited questioning by asking, "Who do men say that I am?"

The Pharisees and Sadducees posed their own hostile questions. (Note EGW's comment that "Their ideas of God molded their own character." *Desire of Ages*, p. 604). They asked, "By what authority do you do these things?" Again questioning Jesus as the Answer, suggesting that he was not who he claimed to be. Just like the Devil in the wilderness: "*If you are the Son of God...*" For if Jesus was *not* who he said he was, then he was mad, a fool, or an impostor—and *not to be relied on to represent God and his character to humankind*.

The Devil well knew that once God *was* revealed as he truly is, then the Devil's lies would be exposed for what they were. The battle over God's nature and actions would be lost by the Devil if Jesus managed to show beyond dispute the true picture of God. That's the issue at the heart of the questioning of Jesus. Trying to trap him, trying to expose him as a charlatan, trying to convince others that he was not divine, and not trustworthy. And the greatest irony is that the only "charge" they could get to stick was that of blasphemy: claiming to be God. He was, and they killed him for saying so!

Why? *Because Jesus did not fit the picture of the kind of person they believed God to be*. If this was God in human form, they didn't want to know. Besides, they *knew* what God was really like—and he *certainly* wouldn't act as Jesus did. By such circular reasoning then, they proved Jesus was a liar. He was not God—and therefore he deserved to die. This is where the questions inexorably lead—to God's final answer, the Cross.

8. The Final Journey

Biblical material: Mark 10:32-11:25.

Quotes:

- The most ridiculous concept ever perpetrated by H. Sapiens is that the Lord God of Creation, Shaper and Ruler of the Universes, wants the saccharine adoration of his creations, that he can be persuaded by their prayers, and becomes petulant if he does not receive this flattery. Yet this ridiculous notion, without one real shred of evidence to bolster it, has gone on to found one of the oldest, largest and least productive industries in history. *Robert A. Heinlein*
- If God has spoken, why is the world not convinced. *Percy Bysshe Shelley*
- What men usually ask for when they pray to God is, that two and two may not make four. *Russian proverb*

Introductory questions

Why did Jesus choose to go to Jerusalem, and to enter in such a spectacular way? Why didn't he put down the two ambitious disciples in a stronger way? What was his attitude towards the situation in the Temple, and what do we learn about God from the way he fixed it? What should we learn from the cursing of the fig tree? How are we to pray?

Discussion ideas

Jesus leads the way to Jerusalem—with the disciples astonished and the other followers fearful. Already it was clear that Jesus faced great danger. So he takes the time to explain the crucifixion and resurrection. The response? James and John ask for positions of power and prestige! How hard it must have been for Jesus to see this petty squabbling on the eve of his great trial. He explains to them once again the real values of his Kingdom, and that this is nothing like the value system of the world. Most of all he points to the fact that he came to serve, not to be served. This is the God who comes at great cost—to give his life a ransom for many.

The healing of blind Bartimaeus also points to the God who is not hostile, but wholly friendly, wanting to save and heal. He simply asks Bartimaeus what he wants!

The story of the colt is an interesting one. Why should the owners let the disciples take it? Perhaps they knew them, and Jesus too...? Jesus' triumphal entry reveals that the crowd is easily swayed to celebrate with joy, yet without much understanding.

In the cleansing of the Temple, we see God's rejection of such a system that was being abused for personal profit by the religious leaders. As the lesson comments, are there ways in which our worship can also become formalized and ritualistic, with ideas of payment and commerce? Also, how did Jesus act? We often use the term "righteous indignation," yet mean it to cover something other than good motives. How did Jesus continue to represent God here?

Similarly in the cursing of the fig tree, what was Jesus trying to show? Is God so antagonistic that he would frivolously cause death to any living organism? What should we be seeing here about God and how he acts? What would the onlooking universe see?

In his comments on prayer, what is Jesus telling us? Is there some kind of cast-iron formula for getting what you want? And why does he emphasize the importance of settling disputes with others before continuing in prayer? This says much about our heavenly Father and the way we should approach our conversations with him...

Ellen White Comments

The priests and elders had had unmistakable evidence of Christ's power. In His cleansing of the temple they had seen Heaven's authority flashing from His face. They could not resist the power by which He spoke. Again in His wonderful deeds of healing He had answered their question. He had given evidence of His authority which could not be controverted. But it was not evidence that was wanted. The priests and elders were anxious for Jesus to proclaim Himself the Messiah that they might misapply His words and stir up the people against Him. They wished to destroy His influence and to put Him to death. {COL 273}

In the defilement and cleansing of the temple we have a lesson for this time. The same spirit that existed among the Jews, leading them to substitute gain for godliness, and outward pomp for inward purity, curses the Christian world today. It spreads like a defiling leprosy among the professed worshipers of God. Sacred things are brought down to a level with the vain matters of the world. Vice is mistaken for virtue, and righteousness for crime. Temporal business is mingled with the worship of God. Extortion and wicked speculation are practiced by those who profess to be servants of the Most High. {2SP 123}

Extra material

Some years ago I was on a plane from Dallas to Washington, DC. Next to me sat a lady with many questions—especially about God and his relationship to our world. She was amazed and delighted when I shared the good news about God. That AIDS is not the plague of God, but the consequences of sin in an evil world. That the innocent suffer along with good, and that suffering is not the vindictive punishment of an angry God. That God is not hostile but friendly, one who has demonstrated his true nature in trying to win us back to love and trust him.

Then she asked about Hell? Isn't that terrifying eternal torture by a tyrant? she wondered. God the criminal! I explained what we know God to be like, and what we believe about Hell. Then I told her what I believed about God, based on the revelation of God in Jesus. She couldn't believe it! Is God really that good? she kept on asking.

We had a wonderful talk for more than four hours! Before we parted she asked for a copy of my book "Fear Not? Why Not?" so she could learn more about this truly friendly Father God who loved us so much that he has died to save us.

Mark's gospel is all about this God of love and how he has shown himself to us in Jesus. It tells what the great controversy is all about. It explains that the whole universe is involved in God's answer to the charges of Satan the Accuser. And it shows how God has answered these questions about his nature.

For if we do not know God then we can never rightly relate to him, never love him as he truly is, never understand his incredible gift of himself to us.

Why did Jesus come? There are so many answers--but the one Jesus keeps on referring to is the essential one. Remember these texts:

- John 14:7,9 NIV: "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."
- John 12:44,45 NIV: When a man...looks at me, he sees the one who sent me."
- Luke 10:22 NIV: "No-one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."
- John 1:18 NIV: "No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known."

This is the essence of our belief. We have seen God revealed in Jesus, and wish to love and trust such a God eternally. God is not an enemy. God is not hostile. He is our loving Father and friend who wishes us all to come to him.

"If I be lifted up...I will draw all unto me," says Jesus. God is long suffering towards us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. What do you say to such an incredibly loving Lord? Come to him, praise him, talk about him to everyone you can, and let your life shine for him.

9. Last Days in the Temple

Biblical material: Mark 11:27–12:44.

Quotes:

- In religion and politics people’s beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing. *Mark Twain*

Introductory questions

Why are the religious leaders so insistent on Jesus giving proof of “authority”? Why did Jesus then begin to speak in parables? How does he represent God especially in this confrontational situation?

Discussion ideas

The question over authority goes to the heart of such religious beliefs. It is not, “who has the truth?” but “who has the right?” In claiming the right to determine what should be believed, these religious leaders set themselves up as the ultimate authority, and did not allow the common people the freedom to make their own choices. This has always been the Devil’s way—to restrict and to control, to force and to compel. Since Jesus refused to be subject to them and their supposed authority, they were desperate to get rid of this trouble-maker. No matter his miracles, his acts of healing, his kindnesses—all this was nothing of he operated beyond their commandeered authority.

Jesus simply appeals to the truth. But since they refuse to admit such clarity, Jesus refuses to argue with them. Instead he reveals the truth by very direct stories that all could understand. They recognized themselves as the wicked husbandmen, and sought to arrest him. But since public opinion was still with Jesus, they could do nothing too directly.

So, uniting together in opposition to Jesus, they come with questions designed to trap him, to make him unpopular. Beginning with flattery, they try to make him take sides on the tax question. Jesus does not evade the question; rather he answers it on a higher level. Similarly on the resurrection—Jesus just points to what they should already know from Scripture.

The question on the most important commandment was one that came from more honest motives. The response from the questioner, and Jesus comment that he was not far from the Kingdom, revealed that he was recognizing true values. After that, no more questions. And perhaps Jesus was sad even about that, since as long as people are asking questions, there is the chance to help them see the truth...

His condemnation of the religious teachers, his rejection of their systematic mechanisms of salvation, and his censure of their pride and arrogance surely brought murmurs of approval from the crowd. Yet although the crowd “heard him with delight,” Jesus was not a people-pleaser. He just wanted to get the truth across, and save as many as would come to him. Why did Jesus speak so directly? Now to deliberately antagonize, you can be sure, but rather to help people see the error of their ways and repent.

The widow’s mite revealed the commitment that in spiritual terms could mean salvation. Yet such were usually despised. In these last teachings, Jesus reveals the principles of his Kingdom, from a King who was about to be crucified.

Ellen White Comments

In rejecting the truth, men reject its Author. In trampling upon the law of God, they deny the authority of the Law-giver. It is as easy to make an idol of false doctrines and theories as to fashion an idol of wood or stone. By misrepresenting the attributes of God, Satan leads men to conceive of Him in a false character. With many, a philosophical idol is enthroned in the place of Jehovah; while the living God, as He is revealed in His word, in Christ, and in the works of creation, is worshiped by but few. Thousands deify nature while they deny the God of nature. Though in a different form, idolatry exists in the Christian world today as verily as it existed among ancient Israel in the days of Elijah. The god of many professedly wise men, of philosophers, poets, politicians, journalists—the god of polished fashionable circles, of many colleges and universities, even of some theological institutions—is little better than Baal, the sun-god of Phoenicia. {GC 583}

Extra material

The use of force is alien to the way God works. And if God won't force us, why should we force others? I know sometimes we want to shake people by the lapels to convince them, because they seem so slow to respond, but it doesn't work. And remember: You cannot persuade and antagonize at the same time! We must give people the right to choose, to invite in the same way that God does.

Look again at Revelation 13:11-17. The key words of the beast are "AUTHORITY. SIGNS. DECEIVED. ORDERED. POWER. KILLED. FORCED." That should set you thinking, especially in the context of this week's lesson.

What kind of religious power is this? A power that seeks to use FORCE to gain its way. When the beast and the image operate at the End, we see the Devil in his true colors—using force to get his own way. He uses might and power, and religious liberty goes out of the window in the name of religion!

It's so easy to follow the Devil's leading and paint the wrong picture of God. What do *you* have on your paintbrush as you paint your God-picture? As Ellen White says: "our whole spiritual life will be molded by our conception of God's character." (RH, Apr.5, 1887).

We may each agree with all our church teachings and still be completely wrong about God! We may have the right understanding about the Sabbath, the Second Coming, the State of the Dead, Tithe, Healthy Living and all the rest—but still not know the nature of the true God..

Think for a moment about the religious leaders of Jesus' time:

Were they Adventists? - Yes, waiting for the Messiah to come.

Did they believe in the Sabbath? - Yes, 100%

What about the Sanctuary, did they believe in that? - Yes, they even practiced it!

And the Bible idea of Tithe? - Yes down to the herbs in the garden!

What about healthy living? - Yes again - no unclean meats eaten there.

And did they worship God? - Yes, well at least they thought so.

So they were very much like us. And what did they do? Crucified the Lord of glory, because they did not *know* him, didn't understand what God is really like: "Multitudes have been led to cherish an erroneous conception of God, as the Jews, misled by the errors and traditions of their time, had a false conception of Christ. 'Had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.'" 5T710.