

In the last post I pointed out that Mark and Luke have very (very!) different portrayals of Jesus going to his death. In this post I want to explain why that ultimately matters for understanding each of the Gospels: without understanding this difference, you will misunderstand *both* Gospels.

I have argued that the two portrayals of Jesus going to his death in Mark and Luke are radically different, and that recognizing this radical difference is of utmost importance for understanding what each author is trying to say. The in-shock, silent Jesus of Mark, who is betrayed, denied, abandoned, and mocked by everyone, who wonders at the very end why God himself has forsaken him, simply is not the same as the calm confident Jesus of Luke, who knows God is on his side, who understands what is happening to him, and who knows what will happen to him after it happens to him: he will wake up in paradise.

A deeper understanding of each Gospel seeks to understand the portrayal of Jesus found in each and every one of the Gospels, but also asks what each account is actually trying to *teach* by making that kind of portrayal. This is where matters get more speculative, and this is where both theology and preaching start getting interesting. I realize (oh so well) that I am no longer theologically driven or involved with preaching, but to conclude this hiatus-of-a-thread, I do have to say what I think each account is trying to say.

Let's imagine - it's not much of a stretch of the imagination, actually, even though there is not concrete evidence behind it - let's imagine that each of these Gospels is written to Christians who are experiencing real suffering in their lives. Possibly it is a difficult persecution. Possibly it is the animosity of friends and family and neighbors and co-workers and everyone else who is opposed to their new-found faith in Jesus. Or possibly it is hardship in the world that seems unbearable. Suppose both Mark and Luke, writing at different times (say 15 years apart) in different parts of the world, are both confronted with some such situations. Why would they portray Jesus going to his death the way they do?

Here's what I think. You're welcome to think something else!

Mark's Jesus does not seem to understand...

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[/private]Mark's Jesus does not seem to understand why he has to suffer the agonies of the cross and why it seems that God has abandoned him to his suffering, so that he receives no palpable comfort from God, only the torture and agony of crucifixion as one who has been forsaken by everyone. But the thing about Mark's Gospel is that the reader - as opposed to Jesus - has a different view of why Jesus is suffering. Because when Jesus cries out and dies his miserable death, the reader learns that two things happen at once. The curtain in the temple is ripped in half, and the centurion who has just crucified Jesus confesses "Truly this man was the Son of God."

The temple curtain was what separated the Holy of Holies, where God was believed to dwell, from the rest of the temple and, in fact, the rest of the world. No one had direct access to God's presence, except once a year, when the High Priest would go behind the curtain on the Day of Atonement, and make a sacrifice in God's presence for the forgiveness of sins. When Jesus died, the curtain was ripped in half. Now, because of his death,

everyone has access to God. And they don't need the Jewish sacrificial system to have it. It is in Jesus' death that people can come into the presence of God - all people, Jew and gentile. And that is shown by the fact that the centurion - a gentile/pagan - recognizes it. Jesus' divine sonship is not negated by his death. On the contrary, it is precisely in his death that he is manifest as the Son of God who brings salvation to the world.

Why then does Jesus seem to suffer as one who is abandoned by God? Mark, in my opinion, is trying to say something. Sometimes suffering is more than one can bear. Sometimes suffering does not seem to make sense. Sometimes one's seemingly random and pointless suffering appears to show that God is nowhere to be found, that a person has in fact been abandoned by God. But according to Mark, God is working behind the scenes. He is in fact bringing good out of evil. He is in fact making suffering redemptive. It may not seem like it, and a person may not be able to see it at the time (like Jesus in this account). But in fact that's what's happening. God is one who brings salvation out of suffering. And so even when one feels completely abandoned, it is possible to know that God is at work to make right all that is wrong.

Luke has a different approach to suffering. His Jesus does not feel abandoned, forgotten, and forsaken (which is why Jesus does not cry out "My God my God why have you forsaken me" in Luke, and why the curtain does not tear in half right after he dies). Here Jesus is calm and in control because he *knows* God is on his side (just the opposite view of Mark). And why? Luke is telling his suffering readers that Jesus sets the example for them. Like Jesus, Luke's community can know that no matter what happens, however bad it gets, however miserable life becomes, God is with them. And they can feel his palpable presence. In their sufferings, they should be like Jesus - confident that God is on his side, concerned more for others than himself, praying for those who are inflicting his pain, comforting others who are also suffering. Because the suffering will end soon, and then those who are on the side of God will wake up in Paradise.

These are two very different portrayals of Jesus, with two very different understandings of what it means to suffer, and two very different views of how God is involved in suffering. From my perspective one is not necessarily better than the other. But both are important - and both completely evaporate into thin air when the story of Mark is smashed together with the story of Luke by readers who insist that they are not saying different things but the same thing. When people read Mark and Luke in that way, reconciling their differences, they rob both accounts of their meaning and their message, and completely impoverish both texts, destroying an understanding that can be achieved only by taking a historical critical approach to their interpretation.[/private]



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