Mark is making the same point here to the reader that he made with the passion predictions. Christians—especially, Christian leaders—who seek their own good will come to eternal ruin, whereas those who deny themselves will imitate Jesus and receive his praise. It is also significant that in the next section, Mark will directly attack Christian leaders of his own time.

Questions for Reflection:

Do Christians today sometimes pray only for appearance's sake? What are the marks of genuine prayer? Do the poor contribute more than the rich?

35. Mark 13:1–37

And as he was going out of the temple, one of his students said to him, "Teacher, look what stones and what buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "You see these great buildings? There will not be left here a stone on top of a stone that will not be thrown down" (13:1–2).

And as he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us when these things will be and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished" (13:3–4).

And Jesus began to say to them, "Watch out, lest anyone mislead you. Many will come in my name saying, 'I am he,' and they will mislead many (13:5–6).

"But when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. It must happen, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These things
are the beginning of the labor pains. As for you, watch out yourselves! They will hand you over to the councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues, and you will be made to stand before governors and kings on account of me for testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all the nations. And when they bring you to hand you over, do not worry beforehand what you are to say. But whatever is given to you at that hour, say this. For you are not the ones speaking, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will hand over brother to death, and father will hand over his child, and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all because of my name. But those who endure to the end will be saved (13:7—13).

“But when you see the devastating sacrilege standing where it must not be” (let the reader take note!), “then let those in Judea flee to the mountains; let those upon the roof not come down nor go in to take anything from their house; and let those in the field not turn back to take their coat. And alas for those who are pregnant and those who nurse in those days. And pray that it may not happen in winter. For those days will be an affliction such as has not happened from the beginning of creation (which God created) until now and will not happen. And if the Lord had not shortened the days, no flesh would be saved. But because of the chosen whom he chose, he shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, ‘Look here! It is the Messiah!’ ‘Look there!’ Do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will rise up and will give signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, the chosen. Now you watch out. I have told you everything beforehand! (13:14—23).

“But in those days, after that affliction, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give her radiance, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the son of humanity coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather together the chosen from the four winds, from the end of the earth until the end of heaven (13:24—27).

“From the fig tree learn a metaphor. When its branch has already become soft and put out leaves, you know that summer is near.
So, you too, when you see these things happening, realize that he is near, at your doors. Truly I say to you that this generation will not pass away until all these things happen. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, only the Father. Be alert, keep awake, for you do not know when the time is. It is like a person away on a trip who left their house and gave responsibility to their slaves, a job for each, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. So, watch! For you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening or at midnight or cockcrow or in the morning, lest coming unexpectedly, he finds you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all, watch!” (13:28–37).

Up to this point, Mark’s gospel has dealt with the past and must have seemed uncontroversial to its first Christian readers. So far, the evangelist has avoided making direct comments about contemporary church affairs. Instead, he has passed on what presumably were familiar and beloved stories. The narrative as a whole resembles an ancient biography, and so readers could have assumed they were basically experiencing a “life of Jesus.” To be sure, Mark has shaped the material in a personal way. However, at this time the traditions about Jesus mostly lacked fixed wording or order, and every Christian who passed on the material had to shape it.

In this section, however, Mark gives us a sketch of church history virtually from the time of Jesus to the end of the world. According to the outline, during the first period of church history there will be various catastrophes in the larger world, including wars, earthquakes, and famines. Meanwhile, Christians will preach the good news throughout the world and suffer persecution and public hatred. Accordingly, patient endurance will be essential. Next, there will be a supreme crisis. The suffering will be more extreme than in all of previous human history. As a result, Christians will face an unparalleled temptation to fall away. Indeed, if God had not shortened this terrible time, no one would be able to remain faithful. During
In providing this sketch, Mark has drastically shaped earlier traditions. Much—perhaps most—of the basic material Mark took from the oral tradition, and presumably the majority goes back to Jesus himself. Nevertheless, Mark has carefully molded it. Indeed, he has not hesitated to intervene so dramatically that at least a few sections clash with their settings. It is startling to read in the midst of a speech by Jesus, “Let the reader take note!” Scarcely less disturbing is the conclusion in which Jesus supposedly says in private to Peter, James, John, and Andrew, “And what I say to you, I say to all, watch!”

From Mark’s careful editing of the section, we can see that he is writing during the period of supreme crisis. Of course, Mark’s intrusive comment, “Let the reader take note!” makes it especially obvious that his principal concern is the horrifying events he now relates. Nevertheless, there are other editorial indications. For example, it is interesting that Jesus begins his private comments to Peter, James, John, and Andrew by warning that people will come in his name and try to lead others astray. In the subsequent outline of church history, we read no more about these false prophets until the period of supreme crisis. Hence, Jesus’ opening comment is not about the first thing that will happen, but rather is a summary of the most important point Mark is making for the reader.

Mark clearly implies that one of the events that will take place during this dreadful period is the destruction of the temple, and so we may assume that he is writing around the year 70 BCE and is responding to Nero’s persecution and the Jewish War. The section begins with an unnamed disciple remarking on the glories of the temple and Jesus’ solemn prediction that the structure will be utterly ruined. Jesus’ actual speech is a response to a request that he specify “when these things will
be." Therefore, it seems clear that Mark is writing about the
time of the temple's destruction. Since the Roman armies
destroyed the building in 70 BCE, we must assume that the
events in church history which occurred around that year were
especially relevant to Mark and his audience. The two most
important were Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome,
which occurred from around 65 CE until 68 CE, and the war
between the Jews and Rome, which lasted from 66 CE until 70
CE.

As Mark suggests, this period was catastrophic for the
church. After the great fire of Rome in 64 CE, there were
rumors that Nero himself had arranged for the conflagration
so that he could rebuild the capital on a grander scale. Accord-
ingly, he needed a scapegoat and fastened on the Roman
Christians. He accused them of arson and began executing
them, often in horrifying and grotesque ways, including burning
them alive. Then in 66 CE, the Jews in Palestine revolted, and
for the next four years, Palestine was decimated by battles
between Jewish and Roman forces. Presumably, both sides
persecuted Christians. The Romans would have regarded them
as Jews, whereas the rebels would have regarded any sect which
was open to Gentile membership as collaborators.

Mark makes it clear that his principal concern is to keep his
readers from trying to escape suffering by following the false
messiahs. Throughout Jesus' description of coming events, we
get various warnings that the suffering will be intense and
endurance necessary. Thus, these themes already appear in the
description of the first period of church history—even though
this era was past for Mark and his readers. Mark stresses that
Christians will suffer death and universal odium and ends the
section by reminding us, "But those who endure to the end will
be saved." Of course, "the end" includes the period of catastro-
phe that Mark then describes. The warnings become more shrill
as Mark narrates this time of crisis. He insists the sufferings will
be so intense that endurance will be practically impossible.
Indeed, if God had not shortened the time, no one could be
saved. Accordingly, we must especially beware. Finally, Jesus’ discourse ends with repeated warnings to “watch!” What we are to beware of is the seduction of the false prophets and messiahs. As we noted above, Jesus begins his private comments by warning us against people who will come in his name. Then he emphatically repeats these warnings as he describes their advent during the time of catastrophe. From the perspective of the Christian readers for whom Mark was writing, it is especially significant that Jesus warns that these false prophets would “lead astray, if possible, the chosen,” since that includes the readers. Significantly, Mark ends the discourse by addressing the readers once again and warning us that we must remain steadfast: “What I say to you, I say to all, watch!”

From what Mark tells us, it appears that the false prophets and messiahs were attractive for two reasons. First, they were Christians and claimed to be faithful to the example of Jesus. In the discourse, Jesus warns the Christian reader that these imposters will come in his own name. Second, they worked miracles. Jesus warns they “will give signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, the chosen.”

Consequently, Mark implicitly invites his intended readers to compare the message and the miracles of the false messiahs with those of Jesus. The false messiahs claim to be faithful to the example of Jesus. Yet this claim, at least according to Mark, is a lie. Therefore, in reality, their message and their miracles differ radically from those of Jesus. In his book, Mark presents Jesus’ message and miracles and, by implication, invites us to contrast them with those of the Christian prophets who have arisen lately. In this gospel Jesus emphasizes that he and his followers must be “servants of all” (9:35) and “take up their cross” (8:34). He also never works miracles to escape suffering or inspire faith or gain public approval. Presumably, the “false messiahs” whose “signs and wonders” might mislead the chosen had a different approach.
Mark also tells his readers that soon they will see the real Messiah, who will reward those who have been faithful. After the brief period of tribulation “they will see the son of humanity,” and he will gather his elect.

Now Mark will go on to narrate the most moving part of Jesus’ life: His suffering and death and forcefully remind readers what kind of Messiah Jesus was.

Questions for Reflection:

Are there Christian miracle workers today who use signs and wonders to promote their own glory and deceive people concerning what following Jesus means? Would Mark’s message have been different if he had not been writing during a period of persecution? How are Mark’s warnings relevant to us who do not live in a time and place where the church is suffering catastrophically? Was Mark mistaken when he proclaimed that Jesus would return relatively soon? Should we today assume that Jesus will return during our lifetime, or instead, that we will meet Jesus when we die?

36. Mark 14:1–11

Now the Passover and the holiday of unleavened bread were two days away. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize him by deceit and kill him, for they were saying, “Not on the festival, lest there be a disturbance among the people” (14:1–2).

And while he was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, when he was dining, a woman came who had an alabaster jar of perfume, spikenard in pistachio oil, very expensive. She broke the