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
jar and poured the perfume down on his head. Now there were some people who became indignant among themselves, “Why did this waste of perfume happen? For this perfume could have been sold for over three hundred days’ wages and the proceeds been given to the poor!” And they scolded her. But Jesus said, “Let her be! Why are you bothering her? She has indeed done a beautiful deed to me. For you always have the poor with yourselves, and whenever you want, you can do a kindness to them, but you are not always going to have me. She did what she could. She perfumed my body in advance for burial. Truly I say to you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she did will also be told as her memorial” (14:3-9).

And Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went away to the chief priests to betray him to them. And when they heard, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he was seeking a good time to betray him (14:10-11).

The beginning and end of this unit tell how the plot against Jesus is developing. Thus, at the start of the section, the chief priests and scribes want to seize Jesus, but they hesitate to do so lest there be a riot. At the end of the section, Judas offers to hand him over to them and so solves their problem.

By inserting the story of the woman pouring perfume on Jesus within the narration of the betrayal, Mark invites us to compare the woman’s action with that of Judas. Originally, the story of the perfume was probably independent of the story of the betrayal. When people repeated these two narratives orally, it would have been difficult to combine them in the way they appear in Mark. Hence, Mark produced the sandwich arrangement himself. Literally, sandwiching these stories invites the reader to look at them together and compare.

Viewed together, the stories contrast the faithfulness of the anonymous woman with the perfidy of one of Jesus’ leading students. In the story, Mark stresses that the woman is otherwise unknown. He simply introduces her as a person who came and poured perfume over Jesus. At the end of the narrative, we
read that it is this deed alone which will be her memorial. By contrast, Mark explicitly reminds us that Judas is “one of the twelve.” Of course, the woman’s actions are praiseworthy, whereas Judas’s are evil.

Perhaps Mark intends for his readers to view Judas’s actions as a warning against the false prophets and false messiahs. Just a few verses earlier Mark has emphasized that Christian leaders will try to mislead the chosen and that the reader must beware. Now in the narrative, Mark gives us an example of a Christian leader who betrays Jesus.

Questions for Reflection:
Are the official leaders of the church usually more or less faithful to Jesus than the ordinary members? What are the special gifts that leaders have? What are the special dangers that come with leadership?

37. Mark 14:12–52

And on the first day of unleavened bread, when they were slaughtering the Passover lamb, his students said to him, “Where do you want us to go and prepare so you may eat the Passover?” And he sent out two of his students by saying to them, “Go off into the city, and a person carrying a water jar will meet you. Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, ‘The teacher says, “Where is my dining room where I may eat the Passover with my students?”’ And he will show you a big upstairs room furnished and prepared. And there prepare for us.” And the students went out and came into the city and found it just as he said to them, and they prepared the Passover (14:12–16).
And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining and eating, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you that one of you will betray me, one eating with me." They began to be distressed and to say to him, one by one, "I am not the one, surely not I?" And he said to them, "One of the twelve who is dipping with me into the bowl, because the son of humanity is departing, just as it is written about him, but alas for that person through whom the son of humanity is betrayed. Better for him if that person had not been born!" (14:17–21).

And while they were eating, he took bread, said a blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to them and said, "Take it, this is my body." And he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and all drank from it. And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant poured out for many. Truly I say to you that I will never drink from the produce of the vine again until that day when I drink it new in God's rule." And they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives (14:22–26).

And Jesus said to them, "All of you will fall away, because it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised, I will go before you into Galilee." But Peter said to him, "Even if all fall away, nevertheless I will not." And Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that on this very night before the cock twice crows, you will disown me three times." But he kept saying emphatically, "If I must die with you, I will not disown you." And all of them also said the same (14:27–31).

And they came to a place whose name is Gethsemane, and he said to his students, "Sit here while I pray." And he took along Peter and James and John with him, and he began to be appalled and distracted, and he said to them, "My heart is mortally wounded with grief. Stay here and watch." And he went ahead a little and fell on the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour would pass by him, and he said, "Abba" (Father), "all things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, not what I want, but what you want." And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, you are sleeping! You could have watched for one hour, couldn't you? Watch and pray that you do
not come into temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh, weak.” And he went away again and prayed, saying the same words. And he came back and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. And he came a third time and said to them, “You are sleeping still and resting up! The matter is settled; the hour has come. Look, the son of humanity is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us go. Look, the man who is betraying me has gotten near” (14:32-42).

And at once, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived and with him a crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now the man who was betraying him had given them a signal saying, “Whomever I kiss, he is the one. Seize him and lead him off securely.” And he came at once and approached him and said, “Rabbi,” and he kissed him devotedly. And they grabbed him with their hands and arrested him. And one of the bystanders drew a sword and struck the high priest’s slave and cut off his earlobe. And in response, Jesus said to them, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as if I were a bandit? I was with you teaching daily in the temple, and you did not seize me. But it is so the Scriptures may be fulfilled.” And they all abandoned him and fled. And a certain young man was also following with him, wearing a piece of linen over his naked body, and they grabbed him. But he left behind the linen and fled naked (14:43-52).

Mark stresses that Judas is part of Jesus’ intimate community and yet betrays him utterly. Mark states repeatedly that Judas is “one of the twelve.” Judas eats with Jesus—indeed, shares the eucharist with him! Then Judas betrays him while calling him “Rabbi,” and kissing “him devotedly.”

Perhaps Mark intends his narrative to be a solemn warning to any Christian reader who might be considering becoming one of the “false messiahs.” Certainly, the scene in which each of the twelve solemnly asks himself whether he is the one who will betray Jesus is both dramatic and moving. Maybe then, Mark wants all of his readers to ask themselves whether they too will
be among those who betray a messiah who chooses to suffer and die in obedience to God’s call.

When people come to arrest Jesus and someone tries to defend him with a sword, Jesus reminds all those who are present (and the reader) that he is not a “bandit”—that is, not a “messiah,” as the term was sometimes understood. In the first century, many would-be messiahs were bandits.

This section emphasizes that even those disciples who want to suffer with Jesus fail completely. Led by Peter, the eleven all insist that they will die rather than deny Jesus. Yet, immediately thereafter, they are not even able to stay awake and pray. Then when Judas and the authorities arrive, the disciples flee. The final scene of the young man dressed in linen symbolizes the abject failure of the disciples who want to share in Jesus’ passion. We read that the young man was “also following with him,” and that tells the readers that we should think of him as one of Jesus’ students, and, since he is present at the time of the arrest, we also should think of him as someone who at least aspires to the way of the cross. Nevertheless, the young man flees away naked, and within Jewish and early Christian culture to flee naked was the ultimate sign of humiliating defeat (cf. Amos 2:16, Acts 19:16).

The reason the students fail despite their sincerity is that they do not watch and pray. Mark stresses that their intentions are good. As Jesus notes, their spirits are “eager.” However, because their “flesh is weak,” they do not persevere in watchful prayer. While Jesus is struggling with God’s bitter will for him, they repeatedly go to sleep. Therefore, when the hour of temptation comes, they fall away.

The failure of the disciples serves as a poignant warning to Mark’s readers. Earlier in the gospel, Mark warns us that a time of testing is at hand and we must be ready. We first receive this admonition in Mark’s interpretation of the Parable of the Sower. The seed which landed on the rock, sprang up and then withered represents those who initially receive the word with
joy but later fall away when persecution comes (4:5–6, 16–17). Of course, the warnings become especially shrill in chapter 13 when Jesus describes in detail the time of supreme crisis. At the conclusion of that discourse, Jesus repeatedly tells us to “watch.” Indeed, Jesus’ last words are, “What I say to you, I say to all, watch!” (13:36). Hence, when Mark subsequently describes how the disciples disregard similar warnings in Gethsemane and so end up deserting Jesus, he is reminding the reader of what will happen to us if we aspire to the way of the cross and yet refuse to wait and pray.

Questions for Reflection:

Are people who are the most enthusiastic about following Jesus often the ones who are least ready to wait and pray? As a result, do such people sometimes fall away in times of stress, whereas other Christians remain firm? Why are enthusiastic people often unrealistic about their own weaknesses? Are some people today prepared to defend Jesus with armed force? What would Mark say to such people?

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38. Mark 14:53–72

And they led Jesus away to the high priest, and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. And Peter from a distance followed him as far as the interior of the high priest’s courtyard and was sitting in the firelight along with the retainers and warming himself. And the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, and they were not finding any. For many testified falsely against him, but their testimonies were not consistent. And some rose and testified falsely against him saying, “We ourselves heard him saying, ‘I will
destroy this sanctuary made with hands, and in three days I will build another not made with hands." And not even so was their testimony consistent. And the high priest rose in the middle and asked Jesus, "Aren't you going to answer anything? What are these people testifying against you?" But he was silent and did not answer anything. Again the high priest questioned him by saying to him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the son of humanity sitting on the right of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven." And the high priest ripped his clothes and said, "Why do we still have need of witnesses? You heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" And they all condemned him to be guilty of a capital offense. And some began to spit on him and to blindfold his face and to hit him and to say to him, "Prophesy!" and the retainers welcomed him with blows (14:53–65).

And while Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the high priest's maids came and, after she noticed Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You too were with the Nazarene Jesus." But he denied it by saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are saying." And he went out into the forecourt, and the cock crowed. And after the maid noticed him, she began again to say to the bystanders, "This is one of them." And he again kept denying it, and after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you too are a Galilean." And he began to bind himself by a curse and swear, "I do not know this person you are mentioning." And at once the cock crowed a second time. And Peter was reminded of the words that Jesus said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will disown me three times." And he began to weep (14:66–72).

Mark carefully connects Jesus' trial and Peter's denial. Mark begins the section by noting both that the retainers led away Jesus to the high priest's residence and that Peter followed from a distance and entered into the courtyard. In line with this introduction, we next have Jesus' trial and condemnation and then Peter's denial.
Thematically, this section reverses Peter’s confession in chapter 8. In that scene Peter responds to the question of who Jesus is by declaring that he is the Messiah. Of course, Jesus tells him not to divulge this publicly because Jesus and his followers must suffer. Now Jesus himself responds to the question of who he is by declaring that he is the Messiah. Meanwhile, Peter is denying that he knows Jesus.

Taken together, these scenes make it evident that a theme of Mark’s gospel is that before we can confess that Jesus is the Messiah, we must confess in word and deed that he is the one who suffered. Here, Jesus confesses publicly that he is the Christ, but he does so to insure that he will suffer. Mark emphasizes that, if Jesus does not publicly confess that he is the Messiah, he will not suffer. Despite the best efforts of the high priests and their retainers, they cannot secure a conviction without Jesus’ cooperation. The testimony of the false witnesses is inconsistent, and the case against Jesus is falling apart. In desperation, the high priest turns to Jesus. If Jesus merely continues to remain silent, he will go free. At this point, Jesus chooses to declare he is the Messiah, and he does so to guarantee that he will endure torture and death! By contrast, earlier in the gospel when Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus tells him not to make the fact known. We soon learn why. When Jesus announces that he must suffer, Peter objects. Now Peter’s unwillingness to suffer makes him deny that he knows Jesus at the precise moment when Jesus himself proclaims publicly he is the Messiah.

To help make it clear that Jesus is the suffering Messiah, Mark carefully balances the title of Messiah with the title “son of humanity.” The chief priest asks whether Jesus is the “Messiah.” Jesus answers, “I am,” but then immediately goes on to speak of himself as the “son of humanity.” As son of humanity, he will suffer in this world and then reign over the age to come.

Probably, Mark also intends to remind his readers that, as “Son of God.” Jesus exercises divine authority and that they will
soon face his judgment. The high priest asks Jesus whether he is the “Messiah, the Son of the Blessed.” Here, the “Blessed” is God. Apparently, for the high priest, the titles “Messiah” and “Son of God” are synonymous, but they are not for Mark. Significantly, in response to the high priest’s question concerning who he is, Jesus replies, “I am,” and, of course, that phrase belongs, properly speaking, to God alone (cf. Exod 3:14). This divine Jesus is the one whom not only the high priest but also Mark’s readers will soon “see” at the final judgment.

Questions for Reflection:

For us, is the fact that Peter denied Jesus a warning or a comfort or both? Do Christians sometimes try to confess Jesus prematurely, before they learn what the cost of following Jesus is? Did the high priest really think that Jesus committed blasphemy? Why?


And as soon as it was day, the chief priests, after consulting with the elders and scribes and the whole Sanhedrin, tied up Jesus and took him off and handed him over to Pilate. And Pilate asked him, “You are the king of the Jews?” But he in reply said to him, “That is the way you would say it.” And the chief priests kept accusing him of many things. And Pilate asked him again, “Aren’t you going to answer anything? See how much they are accusing you of.” But Jesus no longer made any answer, so that Pilate was amazed (15:1–5).

Each festival, he used to release for them one prisoner, whomever they requested. Now there was a man called Barabbas who was