



2012 Lenten Bible Study

Presented by the [Center for Biblical and Theological Education](#) (CBTE)
at Seattle Pacific University

Based on the 2012 Winter Quarter Lectio: Guided Bible Reading on the Gospel of Mark by SPU Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies Laura Sweat, Ph.D., with a Lenten reflection by CBTE Administrative Assistant Kelsey Holloway, M.Div.

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Week 1: Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2012

One Thing: A Lenten Reflection on Psalm 27

By Kelsey Holloway, M. Div.

The human experience is composed of rhythms. Those who commute to work are governed by the traffic patterns and rhythms of rush hour. Our weather patterns change and flux in accordance with the rhythm of the seasons. Students alternate between rigorous studies and times of break as aligned with the rhythm of the school year. Even our cycles of sleeping and waking are dictated by internal Circadian rhythms.

The Church Calendar

The same is true for the church. Different times of the year are elevated for the church to celebrate, reflect, and grow in our journey towards Christ-likeness. Each ebb and flow of the church seasons helps us live into the rhythms of the Gospel with greater intentionality as we remember and reflect on the story of redemption that God has been writing throughout human history. Additionally, following the church calendar is a highly communal endeavor, for as we observe the particularities of liturgical rhythms we stand alongside our sisters and brothers in faith around the world who are likewise meditating on the Christian story and striving to live as citizens of the kingdom.

It is during Advent that we take up the discipline of waiting, cultivating a posture of prayer and expectancy as we look toward Christmas and a celebration of the incarnation. The season of Epiphany points us to the light and life of Jesus as we reflect on his short time on earth and seek to follow his example. In Pentecost we remember the gift of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing ministry of the church that is fueled by the invigoration of the third member of the Trinity. Living in these rhythms sets us apart from the world in a way that reminds us of our true citizenship and our calling to be the aroma of Christ in a broken and hurting world.

Lent

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the next chapter of the church year, ushering in a 40-day season of repentance and confession known as Lent that culminates in the events of Holy Week. If you are like me, I once knew Lent only as the time of year that my Roman Catholic friends abstained from eating meat on Fridays. Or perhaps under great peer pressure you, too, have participated in Lent by choosing a different part of your life to fast from — whether that be chocolate, coffee, or excessive internet usage. These are good practices, but what are they for? It seems we need to take a step backwards in order to gain some perspective on the purpose and meaning of this season.

Before moving to Seattle I spent three years at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. It was a wonderful three years, excepting only for the treacherous winters that Chicagoans must endure. For nearly five months every year, Chicago is subjected to a blustery season of wind, cold, and feet upon feet of snow. During those months we would hunker down and prepare to simply weather the storm. Let's just say that it is not a city for the faint of heart.

During my last winter as a resident I began to envision Lent as the process of washing my car after the effects of a long Chicago winter. For those who are unfamiliar with the effects of Midwest winter driving, envision your vehicle covered in layer upon layer of a nasty, salty, wintery film. With each new snow an additional covering of grit clings to your paint job, serving as a constant reminder of the treacheries of the season. It is an affliction that we bore with dutiful commitment to the city we loved, all the while hoping for warmer days.

Now imagine with me what the first mild day in the beginning of March might feel to a winter-weary soul. The snow has temporarily melted and the first glimpses of spring are on their way. In a moment of mild insanity you decide to take a stab at washing your car — beginning to strip away the layers that have been accumulating over the winter months in hopes that something different is on the way.

The same thing can happen during Lent. Over the year our hearts and minds can become coated with the salt, grime, and dirty snow of life. We can become dulled to the realities of the kingdom and merely trudge through day-to-day existence. Therefore, as we move throughout the year the reflective, repentant nature of Lent could be likened to taking a power washer to the soul. This might not be the typical image used to describe the church year, but perhaps it sheds a little light on what this season is about. As we approach the Easter season we want to strip away what is not of God in order that we might more fully reflect the new creation that was enabled through the work of the cross. We do this through intentional prayer and confession, as well as by taking on various fasts or spiritual disciplines in order that we might realign our priorities and focus on the one to whom we owe everything.

One Thing

Consider the prayer penned by the psalmist in Psalm 27:4-6:

One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

What a beautifully simple request; ponder for a moment if you will on what it would mean for each of us to likewise be defined by this one desire — to want nothing else but to know the goodness of God, to dwell in his presence amid all things, and to celebrate at his provision in any and all circumstances. It seems so simple, and yet this desire is very quickly lost in our daily comings and goings. In our busyness,

have we taken the time to simply gaze upon the beauty of the Lord? Do we even know what that phrase means?

A short and powerful book on this theme is *The Pursuit of God*, by A.W. Tozer. Although written in the late 1940s, Tozer's words have an astoundingly prophetic voice for the church of the 21st century. In the first chapter he writes:

Every age has its own characteristics. Right now we are in an age of religious complexity. The simplicity which is in Christ is rarely found among us. In its stead are programs, methods, organizations, and a world of nervous activities which occupy time and attention but can never satisfy the longing of the heart. The shallowness of our inner experience, the hollowness of our worship and that servile imitation of the world which marks our promotional methods all testify that we, in this day know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all.

Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 17.

Reading this sounds a bit like a description of contemporary Christianity. Even with our good intentions, it is very easy to get caught up in the "good things" of faith, losing the essence of that *one thing*. It is easy to lose ourselves in the work that we do, rather than losing ourselves in the presence of God.

For those of us who have been journeying with Christ, this probably isn't a particularly new concept. In fact, most if not all of you have probably heard your fair share of sermons about this sort of theme. However, as Psalm 27 is read in the context of Lent, this reality comes jumping off the page, for it would seem that even in our attempts to pursue a life of faith we often get muddled in the details, losing the posture of worship that the psalmist embodies as he yearns for more of God.

To be sure, there are things about the life of faith that are far from simple. (Please don't hear this as an effortless portrayal of discipleship in which we simply sit around all day with idyllic smiles on our faces as we stare at a picture of Jesus.) However, in a world that is overcomplicated, overcrowded, and overconcerned with the outer appearance, followers of Jesus should long for the simplicity of faith reflected in Psalm 27, spending more time reflecting on what it means to dwell in the house of the Lord, and to simply gaze upon the beauty of the one who gives us life.

On a practical level, let's engage in spur-of-the-moment conversations with God as we go about our workdays, because we are constantly aware of God's nearness. Let's endeavor to be struck by the beauty of the Gospel even as we see a sunset or experience love through a conversation with a friend. Let's pursue spiritual disciplines not as obligations, but as a means of stripping away the things in life that are not of God in order that we would begin to see things clearly again.

As we embark on in our journey toward the cross in this Lenten season, may we be encouraged toward the pursuit of one thing — namely, the life-transforming presence of our Creator. And even now, as we spend the next five weeks studying Mark, may we be reminded of the grace of the Gospel that draws us near and nourishes us in order that we might likewise engage in the world with this same Good News. For we pursue this *one thing* not just for our own sense of pious fulfillment, but for the glory of God and pursuit of his kingdom here on earth.

A prayer from *The Pursuit of God* seems appropriate as our closing today. May these words refresh and encourage us to reorder our lives as we continue in Lent, that we might seek the *one thing* that is truly needed.

O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need of further grace. I am ashamed of my lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made more thirsty still. Show me Thy glory, I pray Thee, so that I may know Thee indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within me. Say to my soul, "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away." Then give me grace to rise and follow Thee up from this misty lowland where I have wandered so long. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 20.

Questions for Further Reflection:

1. If you come from a church tradition that regularly follows the church calendar, what do you see as the significance of such practices? If you do *not* come from this background, what might encourage you to pay more attention to such rhythms now?
2. If someone asked you to define Lent and its purpose in your own words, what would you say? As we begin our study of Mark in this Lenten season, what do you hope to gain?
3. Reread Psalm 27:4–6. What stands out to you about this prayer? What steps might you take in these next days and weeks to “strip down” in order to pursue one thing from the Lord?
4. Spend some time in intentional prayer and reflection in preparation for our Lenten study of Mark.

Week 2: Week of February 26, 2012

A Lenten Introduction to the Gospel of Mark: Mark 1:1–15

By Dr. Laura Sweat, adapted by CBTE Director Celeste Cranston, M.Div.

Good news. Death and Darkness. Revelation. Misunderstanding. Miracles. Mystery. Authority. Suffering. All of these contrasting terms characterize the vivid portrayal of good news in the Gospel of Mark. As we embark on a Lenten venture into this gospel, these contrasting terms accompany us and set the stage for the greatest surprise of all – that Jesus Christ, the son of God Almighty, would lay down his life and in so doing lay out a path of discipleship for us to follow that consists of sacrifice and suffering. In fact, a significant portion of Mark's gospel is dedicated to this account of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection – proportionately more than in any of the other gospel accounts.

But before we move toward a study of Mark's passion narrative, let's explore a brief introduction to this gospel. The best way to introduce the Gospel of Mark is to let Mark himself acquaint us with the gospel. The first 16 verses of the gospel serve as an orientation to the narrative to come. They highlight some important connections between Jesus, God, and God's kingdom. Most importantly, these verses emphasize the significance of the Old Testament for understanding Jesus' ministry, so that the language of God's good news ("gospel") is old, even if the news itself is surprising.

Mark begins, not with the birth of Jesus (as Matthew and Luke do), but rather with a general statement of introduction (Mark 1:1) followed by quotations from the Old Testament. Mark contends, as do all the New Testament writers, that one cannot understand Jesus apart from Jesus' own scriptures, or what Christians call the Old Testament.

Mark's use of the Old Testament is often subtle, but here Mark signals that he is quoting from the Old Testament, when he says, "as it is written in the prophet Isaiah" (1:2). However, only the second half of Mark's quotation actually comes from Isaiah. The first part ("Look, I am sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way") is a quotation that combines Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1. This misattribution strikes many modern readers as odd, at best.

While there may be many reasons for Mark to begin his gospel in this manner, two reasons stand out as significant for our reading of the rest of the gospel.

1. First, it is noteworthy that the book of Isaiah plays a particularly prominent role in the gospel as a whole. Mark quotes from Isaiah at central points in his gospel, and many of the themes of Isaiah seem to be evoked or reenacted in Jesus' ministry. For this reason, Mark may identify Isaiah as his primary Old Testament prophetic voice simply to call to mind the significance of Isaiah's prophecies so that the reader is prepared to encounter them in the coming chapters [Author's Note 1].
2. Second, however, there is a theological reason for Mark to conflate other words with Isaiah's. For Mark, as for New Testament authors as a whole, Old Testament Scripture was a text into which life had been breathed by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's presence, in light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, now helped the church (of whom Mark was a part) interpret Scripture

rightly. To this end, Jesus' coming has empowered his followers with the ability to read Scripture with open, fresh eyes.

Indeed, one of the new ways in which Mark wants his readers to read the Old Testament involves Scripture's coming to life before their eyes. John, the baptizer, is introduced by these scriptures in Mark 1:2–3, but his physical appearance and actions bring another figure of the Old Testament to mind: Elijah. Just as Elijah was a prophet in the wilderness who called all Israel to turn back ("repent") from worshipping the Canaanite god Baal (1 Kings 18:21; 2 Kings 1:8), so John calls "all the country of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem" to repent (Mark 1:5). John's role is one of preparation. Baptism was a means of purification, of symbolizing the turning aside from one way of life and turning toward a new path.

John, resembling Elijah in appearance and action, has come to prepare the way for someone greater (1:2–3, 7–8). John's baptism also prepares the way for a greater baptism to come, a baptism by the Holy Spirit. Yet, when we meet Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, he is given the briefest of geographical introductions ("from Nazareth of Galilee," 1:9), and Mark describes Jesus submitting to John's baptism.

In this way, Mark's brevity in narrating Jesus' baptism focuses less on John (we already know he thinks Jesus is superior to him: 1:7) and more on Jesus' relationship with God. After Jesus is baptized, Mark's audience is given an insider's glimpse at Jesus' connection to God. Here we see what later Christians will call the Trinity: God the Father, the Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as a dove, all appearing at once.

The appearance of the Spirit and the voice of God are possible because the heavens have been "ripped open." The Greek verb here is *σχίζω*, meaning "rip or cleave in two." The image may refer to a passage in Isaiah 64:1, where the prophet calls to God: "O, that you would open the heavens and come down [author's translation]!"

Mark narrates Jesus' baptism in the same way that he portrays John: it is an enactment of Old Testament prophecy. Here, God does rend the heavens and come down to earth in Jesus. If we miss this allusion, the connection between Jesus and God is certainly made clear by the words God speaks: "You are my beloved son, with you I am well-pleased" (1:11). As we have already seen with many statements in Mark 1, this, too, is an allusion to the Old Testament. As God has formerly called the king of Israel "son of God" (e.g., Psalm 2:7), here God calls Jesus not just a son, but a *beloved* son (see Genesis 22:2, 12, 16). This love and pleasure that God takes in Jesus is the foundation for the rest of the gospel's story.

Of course, what God's love of Jesus means is immediately (to use one of Mark's favorite words) put to the test as the Spirit "kicks Jesus out" (the literal meaning of the Greek verb, *ἐκβάλλω*) into the wilderness. Yet again, we recognize an Old Testament allusion: Israel, too, was led out into the wilderness at the beginning of its "ministry." Later generations of Israelites remembered this time in the wilderness as a time of testing (see Psalm 95:7–11), and also a honeymoon period (see Hosea 2:14–23).

Jesus' own time in the wilderness seems to have both of these interpretations as its background. Jesus is tempted by Satan (Mark 1:13), which clearly coordinates with the Israelites' own temptation. But when Mark says the wild beasts attend Jesus, it is uncertain whether these beasts are part of the temptation, or a kind of allusion back to the Garden of Eden (compare Isaiah 11:1–11), pointing to a more positive time, or honeymoon, in the desert. Either way, just as Israel's 40 years in the wilderness served as

preparation for their coming to the Promised Land, so Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness prepares his own way for his ministry.

Likewise, our journey in Lent for 40 days can also be both a time of testing in the wilderness and a honeymoon of sweet communion with God. As we trust him more completely and rely upon him to provide for our every need (allowing the "slime" of our daily lives to be washed away as described in the first reading), we do so in faith remembering that God provided for Israel in their desert wanderings and then later for Jesus in his wilderness sojourn. And this season can also be a means of preparation for us as we look ahead toward Holy Week and to a celebration of the resurrection.

Good News About God

John's time of preparation is over by the end of Mark's introduction: he has already been arrested, and we will not hear the end of his story until Mark 6. The conclusion of John's ministry of preparation signals the beginning of Jesus' own ministry. He begins in Galilee, his home (1:9, 14), and he launches his ministry by preaching "good news about God."

God is now doing something new, as "the time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near" (1:15). This is God's good news: the time has come for new things! But as God has done before, these new things are described in the language of the old things so that the new is an integral part of the old. Mark's summary of Jesus' preaching is almost exactly the same as John's, and also is the call of the prophets of old: "turn around and put your trust in the good news" (1:15).

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, we see Jesus saying and doing surprising things:

- He calls a rag-tag set of disciples to follow him without a job description, details, or any specifics on what this will mean. And they *do follow — immediately!*
- He teaches with authority; exorcizes demons; miraculously heals the sick, lame, and paralyzed; and continues to care for those whom society rejects, breaking open old categories and expectations about this kingdom.
- With authority, Jesus redefines the Sabbath, redefines family, and redefines Satan's defeat by associating it with the forgiveness of humans. All of these point to a redefinition of the kingdom of God which Jesus explains via a set of surprising parables, thus implying that the enigmatic and the mysterious are a central part of this kingdom, at least until all is revealed at the end (4:21–22).
- Further exercising this authority, Jesus shows dominion over the sea, which he calms with a word. Living out these upside-down kingdom values, he enters Gentile territory to cast out a legion of demons, and then interrupts his journey to a Jewish leader's home to stop and heal an outcast, hemorrhaging woman whom he calls daughter. When he picks up the journey again he proceeds to raise the leader's now dead daughter to life.
- As his ministry expands, opposition towards it also grows, especially from established religious leaders. But Jesus commissions his disciples and sends them out nonetheless with authority to proclaim the good news and exorcise demons.
- In spite of the success of the disciples' ventures, it is clear that they don't really grasp Jesus' mission and purpose. They anxiously worry about having enough to eat after having witnessed Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5,000, seeing him literally walk on water, and then again watching him feed another 4,000.

These words and deeds were not only surprising to the scribes, Pharisees, disciples, and various other characters in Mark's gospel: they may also be surprising and sometimes even dumbfounding to the readers of Mark's gospel, 2,000 years later. Mark will use old language to describe new things, so that even what is predicted surprises us. Surprises unite the many themes of Mark's gospel, as Mark describes the coming of God's kingdom as vivid contrasts, bringing light and darkness, revelation and misunderstanding, life and death. In Mark, surprise is foundational to understanding God's good news: only when the gospel is surprising can it shape and change our lives into the lives of disciples, who find life by losing it [Author's Note 2].

Questions for Further Reflection:

1. How does Mark refer to the Old Testament in the introduction to his gospel (1:1–15)? Note a couple of different ways. What impact does this have on you as the reader?
2. Given the discussion above about Mark 1:9–15, how would you describe God's relationship with Jesus? Are there times in your life when you understood God's love and pleasure in you? What about times when you feel that the Spirit has brought you to the wilderness? Looking back, have any of these times been preparation for a season of ministry in your own life?
3. As you look ahead to your own Lenten journey of discipleship, in what ways might surprise be necessary for you to grow as a disciple of Jesus?

Author's Note 1

Mark seems indebted to several themes of the book of Isaiah, and here we should note three.

1. First, as we can see from Mark 1:2–3, Mark uses the term “the way of the Lord” to describe what John the Baptist is preparing. This “way” is a common term in Isaiah, describing the path God is walking to lead Israel from exile back to their home, Jerusalem (for examples, see Isaiah 40:3, 13; 42:16, 24; 43:16, 19).
2. Second, as we mentioned above, Isaiah's descriptions of God creating a “way” in the wilderness spark images of a new Exodus in both Isaiah and then again in Mark. God again will lead the people from slavery to redemption.
3. Third, another theme that has its origins in the Exodus narrative but is recapitulated in the book of Isaiah is the theme of blind eyes, deafened ears, and hardened hearts. As Pharaoh hardened his heart and had his heart hardened in Exodus, so Isaiah proclaims that God is the one who hardens and softens Israel's hearts. This same imagery will appear more than once in the Gospel of Mark, and highlights the significance of the prophecies of Isaiah for the gospel.

Author's Note 2

I have been indebted to more than a few scholars in my reading of the Gospel of Mark. I have found many commentaries useful, and here I may only list a limited number:

- Black, C. Clifton. *Mark* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2011)
- Boring, M. Eugene. *Mark* (New Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007)

- Marcus, Joel. *Mark* (2 volumes; Anchor Bible Commentary 27 and Anchor Yale Bible Commentary 27A; New York and New Haven: Doubleday and Yale, 1999, 2009)

For accessible work on Mark, I cannot recommend highly enough these two works:

- Byrne, Brendan. *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008)
- Juel, Donald H. *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994)

Week 3: Week of March 4, 2012

The Cross of Discipleship: Mark 8:22–10:52

Looking Forward: The Importance of Good Vision (8:22–26)

This week we reach the halfway point of Mark's gospel. However, Mark sets up the narrative so that it is more like a halfway *pivot* than a halfway *point*: this section looks backward to Jesus' ministry through Galilee, and forward, as we travel to Jerusalem (11:1). In fact, the gospel is increasingly focused on Jerusalem and the fate that awaits Jesus there. While much of the first half of Mark emphasizes Jesus' unwavering authority over the forces arrayed against the kingdom of God, the second half focuses on Jesus' life, as Jesus seeks to teach his disciples about his impending suffering and death.

Mark sets up his gospel in such a way to emphasize the importance of Jesus' suffering and death as well as how the lives of Jesus' followers should mirror Jesus' sacrifice and suffering. So far, the narrative has moved at a frenetic pace, with Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee and traveling great distances every day. Now we slow down both geographically and narratively.

The focus is not the travel; it is the teaching. In fact, Mark sets two similar stories as bookends to this section, directing the reader's attention inward to the chapters between the two healings. In both healings, Jesus cures a blind man, and these healings seem to function as more than just an additional proof of Jesus' power over illness. Metaphorically, they emphasize to the reader how important seeing rightly is.

In the first healing (8:22–26), Jesus does not heal the man instantly. Initially, the man cannot see clearly. He sees "people, but they look like trees walking" (8:24). Like the blind man, Mark's audience is granted repeated instances of Jesus' disciples being able to see, but what they see resembles things more like trees than people.

In other words, they continue to misunderstand Jesus' identity and mission, and therefore their own role in following Jesus. The second stage of the blind man's healing, bringing sight *and* understanding of what is being seen, provides hope that the disciples will ultimately both see and understand [Author's Note 1].

The Crossroads: Caesarea Philippi (8:27–9:1)

Jesus and his disciples are at Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost point of Jesus' travels in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus asks his disciples what people are saying about him. We have seen this dialogue in the narrative before. When Mark pauses to narrate John the Baptist's death in Chapter 6, we hear that Jesus is thought to be John the Baptist raised from death, Elijah, or one of the prophets (6:14–16).

The same is true here. As we have noted, Jesus' proclamation of repentance and forgiveness is very similar to John's preaching. Jesus' miracles echo some of Elijah's. Jesus certainly speaks with the scribes and Pharisees as one of the prophets, criticizing their understanding of holiness (e.g., Mark 7:1–23). Jesus then asks the all-important question: "Who do you say that I am?" Acting as the speaker for the disciples here, Peter answers, "You are the Christ" (8:29). It seems that the disciples are actually seeing

rightly. They see that Jesus is the Christ, something that Mark's readers have known since Mark 1:1, if not before.

However, just saying Jesus is "the Christ" does not explain what it means. *Christ* is the Greek word for the Hebrew term *Messiah*. Both mean "anointed one," and originally referred to kings who were anointed with oil when they became king (e.g., 1 Samuel 16:12–13). Later the term meant a person through whom God is accomplishing particular purposes (e.g., Isaiah 45:1).

As time passes and Israel is subjected to one imperial rule after another, some Jews hope that God will send another figure, another Anointed One, who will restore Israel to the glory days, usually imagined as a return to King David's rule. From the texts we have dating from the centuries around Jesus' time, we know that there were people who claimed to be the Messiah and even gained followers. When these messiahs were killed, their followers disbanded. Their death indicated that they were false messiahs and not the true Messiah.

Given the discussions that follow Peter's proclamation, it seems that Peter may have claimed that Jesus is "the Christ," the Messiah, who was going to restore Israel to these Davidic glory days (e.g., Acts 1:6). Jesus does not want Peter spreading this idea around (8:30), and so tells his disciples what being the Christ really entails, which is the exact opposite of what they likely think: he tells them that he will suffer, be rejected, and be killed, rising from the dead three days later (8:31) [Author's Note 2].

While this revelation would have certainly been surprising to the disciples, Peter's reaction to it is even more astonishing. He "rebukes" Jesus, as though he were trying to exorcise a demon out of his master (see Mark 1:25; 9:25)! From Peter's perspective, something terrible must have taken hold of his teacher's mind, because there is no other reason for Jesus to be proclaiming his own death sentence. Real messiahs don't die; only false messiahs die.

So, if Peter is right, Jesus has to be wrong, and Peter seems to think a demon is a possible explanation. Ironically, Jesus turns around and now rebukes Peter, calling *him* "Satan." By doubting the necessity (Jesus "must" die; 8:31) of Jesus' suffering and death, Peter has aligned himself with humanity, as people still in the grip of sin and death. Jesus claims that there are only two sides: God's side, and humanity's side. Peter has shown his cards; he is on the side of humanity.

Jesus now turns to his other disciples (8:33) and also a larger crowd, and teaches them about discipleship in the same language that will govern the end of his life. He describes discipleship in terms of crucifixion. This must have been a shock to a first-century audience; after all, they did not associate crucifixion with a savior, as Christians do now, but with a torturous form of capital punishment. Drawing parallels between his own life and death, and what a disciple's life looks like, Jesus leaves additional connections implicit that later theologians clarify. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words in *Discipleship* may be the most poignant on the subject:

[This is the call] laid on every Christian. ... Those who enter into discipleship enter into Jesus' death. They turn their living into dying; such has been the case from the very beginning. The cross is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death.

Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 87.

While for some Christians this death has been a physical one, for many disciples it means dying to our own wills (3:35; compare 14:36) and our goals, so that we may paradoxically lose our lives to save them, thereby becoming part of this “community with Jesus Christ” (8:35; see Romans 6:1–4; Author’s Note 3).

Transfiguration on the Mountaintop (9:2–13)

We have spent significant time on the first section in this week’s study because it represents a defining moment in Mark’s gospel. Throughout the rest of this section on discipleship, Jesus continues to reiterate the paradox of discipleship (see above), both in his own life (9:31; 10:33–34) as well as for his followers. At the same time, Jesus claims that this same Son of Man who will suffer and die (8:31) will come again with the angels (8:38), and that those standing near him will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come in power (9:1). At a traditional place for God’s revelation to come down to earth, the top of a mountain (see Exodus 20), Jesus’ transfiguration shows a glimpse of this glorious kingdom.

On this mountaintop, Peter, James, and John see several unusual sights: not only does Jesus change, but Moses and Elijah appear, talking to Jesus. It is no wonder the disciples were clueless about what to say and were “terrified” (9:6). The point is not to *dwell* on the top of the mountain, as Peter desires (9:5), but rather to *see* God’s power and to *hear* God’s voice.

The same voice that comes from the clouds here came from the open heavens at Jesus’ baptism, and God is proclaiming something rather similar: Jesus’ sonship is not in doubt, and the disciples are to listen to him (9:7). In other words, God confirms that Jesus’ statement about the Son of Man’s suffering is not a whim, a fancy, or a possible prophecy. It is part of Jesus’ identity as both Son of Man and Son of God.

Furthermore, the fact that Moses and Elijah were on the mountain demonstrates to the disciples (as Jesus later will to the Sadducees, 12:18–27) that the resurrection of the dead is clearly possible, in that, however Moses and Elijah appeared, they were recognizable as themselves [Author’s Note 4].

This clearly made an impression on the disciples, as they ask Jesus not about his transfiguration, but, obliquely, about the resurrection of the dead, by inquiring about Elijah (9:11–13). Here, Mark gives us a clue to why the disciples may miss many of the clues that seem so obvious to us about Jesus’ identity and mission: Jesus’ resurrection is going to clear up many of the details that blind them now (9:9).

Discipleship in the Kingdom: A Summary (9:14–10:15)

For the rest of this section, Mark describes Jesus’ illustrating the sacrificial discipleship to which he calls his followers. First, Jesus exorcises a demon out of another child, thanks to the pleas and faith of a desperate father. This exorcism, much like the healing of Jairus’ daughter (5:21–43), concludes with an allusion to Jesus’ resurrection when he raises the boy (9:27).

This reminder that Jesus, beloved by God (9:7), can raise the dead, foreshadows both Jesus’ own death and his resurrection. Furthermore, it should remind the disciples that the “rising from the dead” that so perplexed them (9:10) is central to understanding Jesus’ identity and authority (9:28–29).

Jesus also uses a variety of examples to demonstrate the importance of sacrifice to his followers. He claims that disciples should receive children into their community because in receiving those with the

least power on the social scale, they were in fact receiving God (9:33–37). Furthermore, anything that separates a disciple from God should be cast aside (9:42–50) or restored (10:1–12).

A Failed Follower and the Problem of Wealth (10:16–45)

Near the conclusion of this section on discipleship, Mark introduces us to the only person in the gospel who refuses Jesus' call to become a disciple. This man declines Jesus' offer because he is unable to disentangle himself from what has separated him from God. The commandments the man says he has kept are the commandments that are directed toward the love of one's neighbor.

Nevertheless, these commandments emphasize the negatives: they tell the man what *not* to do. Jesus then exhorts the man to do two positive things to attain his goal of eternal life: "sell what you own and give the money to the poor" and "then come, follow me" (10:21). It is only at this point in the story that we learn that this man is rich, and his wealth separates him from his life of discipleship, even though Jesus loves him (10:21; Author's Note 5).

Entering the kingdom of God — synonymous with "attain[ing] eternal life" — is not a human possibility. It is possible with God, not because of certain acts that we do [Author's Note 6]. At the same time, the disciples do seem to want credit for the sacrifices they have made, as they have left everything and followed Jesus (10:28), exactly what Jesus wanted this rich man to do (10:21). These are the actions of a true disciple, who loses everything to save it. Of course, Jesus still shows that they have missed the point if they see a direct equation between losing everything and then gaining it all back in return. They will be rewarded, Jesus promises, but he ominously includes the fact that they will also gain persecutions, just as he will (10:30, 33–34).

Looking Backward: 20/20 Hindsight? (10:46–52)

Mark concludes this section on the theme of discipleship by narrating Jesus' last healing miracle, which he performs on another blind man. Like the first miracle in this section, this action serves a secondary purpose for Mark: he points again to the necessity of seeing rightly. Even though Bartimaeus is blind, he can still see that Jesus is a Son of David who can have mercy on him.

In direct contrast to the rich man, who was called to follow Jesus and could not give up his possessions (10:21), in response to Jesus' call, Bartimaeus immediately "throws off" his cloak, showing his willingness to follow Jesus "along the way" (10:52). The reader knows this way is leading to Jerusalem and, therefore, to Jesus' death (11:1).

What will it take for the disciples, still arguing over questions of greatness and superiority, to see rightly? For that matter, what will it take for Mark's audience of any age to see rightly? Perhaps the greatest comfort is found in Jesus' response to his disciples: "all things are possible with God." However, even this central theological claim will be put to the test before the end of the gospel.

Questions for Further Reflection:

1. How would you translate Jesus' command to "take up [your] cross and follow" him (8:34) into a 21st-century idiom, especially if you were trying to communicate with people who do not know what a cross is or how it was used in the first century? Why is this paradox of discipleship so

challenging to us still today?

2. A theme in these chapters is blindness — literal *and* spiritual. Spend some time reflecting on what Mark teaches about these things. Are there ways in which you are currently experiencing spiritual blindness? As we continue through Lent, how might God be calling you to a new kind of vision that sees life in the Kingdom rightly?
3. In what ways do you think Jesus' suffering and death still serve as a "stumbling block" or "foolishness" (as Paul claims in 1 Corinthians 1:23), as it clearly did for Peter (8:32–33)?
4. In today's world, we are often called on to "make the world a better place" through humanitarian gifts. What kind of monetary — or other — sacrifices are Christians called to make? For what reasons? How does Jesus' encounter with the rich man (10:17–30) inform our decisions about how we should or should not live? If you had a similar encounter with Christ, what things would He call you to lay down?

Author's Note 1

One note as we consider this section, however: it is all too easy to read the Gospel of Mark and wonder how the disciples could have misunderstood everything that Jesus states so plainly. Perhaps we should consider how clearly we understand Jesus and his ministry, when those closest to him, who witnessed his miracles, who heard his teaching, could misunderstand him so badly. If they saw trees when they should have seen people, what makes us so sure our own vision is clear?

Author's Note 2

The predictions of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection are all narrated in the third person, describing "the Son of Man." We have seen this title as Jesus' self-designation earlier in the gospel (2:10, 28), and it will become important later as well (14:62). In the Gospel of Mark, this title seems to stem from associations with the book of Ezekiel, where "son of man" was a name describing the prophet, meaning "person," or "human." At the same time, and perhaps more significantly, "Son of Man" is also a title that comes from the book of Daniel, where "one like a Son of Man" appears, coming with the clouds (7:13, NASB). For Mark, the title Son of Man seems to encompass *both* Jesus' divine authority (see 2:10) *and* the necessity of his suffering (8:31), whereas Jesus must redefine the term "Christ" to indicate both these realities.

Author's Note 3

Bonhoeffer claims that by taking up our individual crosses, we do not individually absolve the sins of the world; only Christ's sacrifice did that. Yet "taking up our crosses" is an important image, because it means Christians have an important role to play in terms of sin and forgiveness:

[B]y the power of Christ's suffering [Christians] can overcome the sins they must bear by forgiving them. A Christian becomes a burden-bearer — bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). As Christ bears our burdens, so we are to bear the burden of our sisters and brothers. ... Forgiving sins is the Christ-suffering required of his disciples. It is required of all Christians (*Discipleship*, 88).

A Christian's suffering is exemplified in forgiveness. Forgiving others as God has forgiven us is one way in which disciples lose their lives, only to save them.

Author's Note 4

There are many reasons why Moses and Elijah may have been important figures to appear at Jesus' transfiguration, but two important ones stand out.

- First, God appeared, individually, to both Moses and Elijah (see Exodus 33:17–34:9 and 1 Kings 19:11–18), a fact that sets them apart in the biblical narrative.
- Second, both Moses and Elijah were considered to be eschatological figures in the first century; in other words, an appearance of another “prophet like Moses” (Deuteronomy 18:15) and Elijah (Malachi 4:5–6) was significant to the predictions of the restoration of God's kingdom.

As Jesus imitates — and exceeds — Moses' work, and demonstrates that Elijah as John the Baptist has already come (9:12–13), Mark's audience gets an idea of what Jesus means when he says that the kingdom of God is at hand (1:15).

Furthermore, it is likely that the disciples, like the Pharisees, believed in the resurrection of the dead, but they believed that it would happen to all the righteous at the end of the age (see John 11:24). It is Jesus' claim that the Son of Man would rise before the others, and that they would then have information about Jesus' transfiguration to tell, that is perhaps perplexing them.

Author's Note 5

In fact, this is the only time in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus is described as loving anyone. Love can be implied in other situations, but only here is it explicit.

Author's Note 6

A popular interpretation of Jesus' statement, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (10:25) claims that there was a gate named “Eye of the Needle” in Jerusalem, and camels would have to bend down and could barely squeeze through it. This interpretation seems to miss Jesus' point, though. His point is not that with enough effort, a camel could go through the eye of a needle, and therefore with enough human effort, people can enter the kingdom of God. His point is that from a human perspective (remember 8:33), entering the kingdom of God is not possible. It is only possible for humans to enter the kingdom of God because God can accomplish the impossible. The disciples are surprised because they apparently thought that if anyone could be assured of entrance into the kingdom of God, it would be a rich person (riches understood as a blessing from God) who obeyed the commandments.

Week 4: Week of March 11, 2012

Teaching at the Temple: Mark 11:1–13:37

All That Glitters

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, a rich heiress named Portia sets a test for her prospective suitors. She will consent to marry whoever passes the test. Three suitors in a row choose between gold, silver, and lead caskets. The first suitor chooses the gold casket, feeling that anything less would insult Portia's status and honor. In return, he receives a note that begins like this:

*All that glisters [glitters] is not gold
Often have you heard that told.
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside to behold.
Gilded [tombs] do worms infold. (II.vii.65–69)*

Chapters 11–13 of Mark illustrate this proverb well. Humans are easily distracted by the things that are “gold.” Whether these things are actual gold or money (11:12–25), or less material — such as power (12:1–12), politics (12:13–17), religious practices (12:18–27), or expectations of how events will proceed (13:1–37) — we forget that all that glitters is not gold. By example, Jesus continues to exhort his followers to see things rightly. Internal qualities — such as faith, boldness in action, and perseverance — are the “gold” of God's kingdom.

Triumphal Entry (11:1–11)

A dramatic change of setting takes place in Mark 11. For the first time in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is entering Jerusalem. We have known for several chapters that Jerusalem is where Jesus is going to die. Yet the chapter that prepares for this entrance does not highlight Jesus' imminent death, nor his enemies' triumph. Instead, it begins by showing Jesus' authority and power, as he enters Jerusalem just as a Messiah should [Author's Note 1].

Furthermore, Mark's audience sees Jesus' prophetic authority demonstrated before their very eyes. Simply put: as with any true prophet, what Jesus says comes true. This simple statement becomes increasingly important in this section of the gospel. If Jesus' words prove true about small things, like a colt tied to a post, then they will also prove true about important events in the future, like the destruction of the temple (13:1–4) and the end of the age (13:28–37).

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a colt is certainly significant. While this detail invokes humble images for most modern readers, the connections to Old Testament passages spark grand messianic expectations. For example, Zechariah promised that a new king would come to reign in Jerusalem, and bystanders would know him because of his arrival on a colt (Zechariah 9:9). In this way, Jesus is portraying himself as a truly golden Messiah, one who is worthy of the praises offered.

The people honor Jesus as one who comes in the name of the Lord (see Mark 1:2–3). They point beyond him, similar to his preaching, to the “coming kingdom,” although on this occasion the crowd says this kingdom is “of [their] father David” (11:10; NASB) rather than God's kingdom. This connection to David

also brings to mind expectations of the Messiah, God's chosen one, who is to restore Israel to its glory days, as under David's leadership. Thus, the people cry, "Hosanna," which is Aramaic for "help!" or "save!" The people cry to their Messiah for help, for deliverance, for salvation.

Once the Messiah entered Jerusalem, he was expected to come in and purify the temple to prepare it for the advent of God's kingdom. Jesus enters Jerusalem and looks around at the temple; so far, so good. However, contrary to messianic expectations, Jesus leaves Jerusalem, spending the night at Bethany, a town about two miles away. In this way, Mark makes the claim again: Jesus embodies salvation and deliverance, but the way he does it is consistent with *and contrary to* expectations.

In the Temple (11:12–25)

Mark describes the events of Jesus' return to Jerusalem the following day by intercalating them. One episode sits inside the other, and the events are mutually interpretive. The following brief chart demonstrates this:

Jesus curses the fig tree (11:12–14)

Jesus drives out sellers in the temple, declaring it a house of prayer (11:15–19)

The fig tree Jesus cursed is withered (11:20–21)

Jesus teaches about the power of faith and prayer (11:22–25)

Mark begins telling us about Jesus' teaching in the temple by mentioning the meal Jesus intends to have for breakfast: figs. Many readers of the Gospel of Mark react negatively to this story. Because Mark has told us that it is not the season for figs, the fig tree seems like an innocent bystander in this story. After all, if Jesus could easily feed the 5,000, why is he looking to a fig tree for breakfast in the first place?

If we stop here, though, we have missed the points Mark has made by putting these two stories about the fig tree and the temple right next to each other. When Jesus curses the fig tree, he acts out a parable [see below, Author's Note 4]. In fact, the next parables in Mark's gospel are both about agriculture: first a vineyard (12:1–12) and then another fig tree (13:28–29). As the next episode shows, Jesus is demonstrating what happens to trees, buildings, institutions, or even the leaders of the people of God, when they look beautiful but do not bear fruit. All that glitters is not gold.

When Jesus enters the temple complex itself, he stays in the outer courtyard, which is called the Court of the Gentiles. In this courtyard, Jews who came to the temple to provide offerings for sacrifices had to exchange Gentile money (Roman money) for temple money, which was considered sacred. These buyers and sellers were thought to be integral to the temple's operations.

Using the words of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, he proclaims that the temple's purpose was not to be for Israel alone. The temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations (11:17; Isaiah 56:7). In other words, the court of the Gentiles should have been as sacred as the interior courts. Yet Jesus claims that the practices of the temple leadership have made it corrupt, just as the temple became "a den of robbers" in Jeremiah's day (Jeremiah 7:11; Author's Note 2).

The reaction to Jesus' pronouncement tells us that the temple leadership interpreted it as an indictment against them. In fact, it is likely that Jesus' action in the temple is what provoked the authorities to set events in motion for his arrest, trial, and eventual death [Author's Note 3]. Jesus' action in the temple achieves the same end as his words to the fig tree: they are a commentary on the failure of the tree and the institution, respectively, to bear fruit.

When Jesus' disciples see the withered fig tree upon leaving the temple, they know Jesus' earlier words have proven true. The fig tree will never allow anyone to eat from it again, as it can no longer bear fruit at all. The temple will be in an equally dire situation when Jesus' words prove true against it, as he not only seeks its purification, but will also prophesy its destruction (13:1–4; Author's Note 4).

Much of this section of Mark reiterates the fact that what Jesus says will come to pass. This is true whether Jesus is asking his disciples to find a colt for him to ride (11:2–6), pronouncing judgment on both fig tree and temple (11:12–22; 13:1–4), or illustrating the religious leaders' lack of authority (11:27–33). In this way, when Jesus claims that people will receive whatever they ask for in prayer, his disciples are to believe that this too is true [Author's Note 5]. Now the appropriate place for prayer is not in the temple, but rather outside of it. The outwardly glittering structure has proven, at least in Jesus' eyes, that it is not gold.

Parable as Prophecy (12:1–12)

Throughout Mark 11–13, we see a tension between the crowds, who eagerly listen to Jesus, and the religious leaders in Jerusalem, who are seeking to kill him (11:18–19). This contrast grows increasingly strong as Jesus continues to teach in the temple precincts (11:27). In fact, the controversy grows to a climax when Jesus begins to teach in parables again, and this time he tells a parable that is directly against "the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders" who are listening (11:27).

Jesus tells a parable of a man who plants and prepares a vineyard (12:1) and then rents the vineyard to tenants [Author's Note 6]. The tenants begin to defy the owner of the vineyard when they seize and beat the slave who came to collect the owner's earnings (12:2). Withholding the owner's payment from the fruit of the vineyard effectively implied that the land was theirs and that they were subject to no owner [Author's Note 7].

Each time the owner sends a different slave to collect what is due to him, the tenants increased the levels of violence against the slaves (12:4–5). At this point in the story, we hear that the owner will change his plans and will send his beloved son, claiming that "they will respect him," showing the son the same level of deference that is due the father (12:6). Instead, they kill the son. This time, however, they kill not for resistance to the owner, but for gain for themselves (12:8). The results are expected: the owner comes, "destroys" the tenants, and gives the vineyard to others (12:9).

Like its Old Testament parallel in the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1–7, what begins by highlighting the love and care of the vineyard owner (Isaiah 5:1–2; Mark 12:1–6) concludes by passing judgment on the offending party (Israel in Isaiah; the Jerusalem leadership in Mark). Furthermore, the actions of the tenants represent Israel's actions towards its messengers and prophets. Finally, the connection between the actions of the vineyard owner and God's actions in sending Jesus (9:37) are clear when the owner claims that he has a "beloved son" left to send; this is exactly how God has described Jesus (1:11; 9:7).

The prophesied destruction of the temple matches the prophesied movement away from the temple: prayers of faith on a mountaintop will be answered just as surely as a rejected stone — a rejected Son — will become the capstone of the building (12:10).

Controversy Again: Politics (12:13–17) and Religion (12:18–27)

In the next scene, Mark's audience sees the Pharisees and Herodians conspiring together to compel Jesus to say something that would provoke his arrest (see 3:6). They begin by asking Jesus a question about politics: Should faithful Jews pay Roman taxes? Jesus asks them for a denarius, a Roman coin equivalent to a laborer's wages for a day. Jesus' answer bests his opponents by not answering the question he is asked. While Caesar's face is on the denarius, thereby implying the coin is in fact Caesar's and that Jews should pay taxes, it is also true that everything is God's (see Psalm 24:1; Mark 13:19). Given that Jesus has criticized Gentile governance and leadership earlier in the gospel (10:42–45), his answer to the Pharisees and the Herodians is complex at best: give Caesar his, but give God all.

The Sadducees then approach, asking a question about theology. The Sadducees use an example from Mosaic law to prove, by implication, that there is no resurrection (12:18, 23). If a woman, fulfilling the law, marries multiple men sequentially, "in the resurrection whose wife will she be?" (12:23). Jesus claims that the Sadducees "know neither the scriptures nor the power of God" (12:24).

The Sadducees were a Jewish group that held the Torah, or first five books of the Old Testament, to be authoritative. Therefore, Jesus uses scriptures that they hold sacred to show that they are incorrect. Since God is the God of the living, *and* God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then there must be a resurrection (otherwise God would be the God of the dead, as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have all died). Mark's audience does not need this argument to believe in resurrection, however: they know resurrection happens because they have seen it (5:43; 9:27), although the best is yet to come (16:1–8).

A Scribe Breaks Stereotypes (12:28–34)

Mark's readers have now seen four episodes where Jesus trumps his opponents in arguments or parables (11:27–33; 12:1–12; 12:13–17; 12:18–27). When another scribe approaches, readers may well expect Jesus versus Opponents, Round 5. Instead, Mark turns the tables. The scribe asks a fairly straightforward question: "Which commandment is the first of all?" (12:28). Jesus replies the way nearly every first-century Jew would, with the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–9).

Proclaiming that the goal of humanity is love of God and love of neighbor is not novel, despite the difficulty in accomplishing these commandments. Instead of seeking to kill Jesus (12:12), leaving astonished (12:17), or being silenced by Jesus' judgment (12:27), the scribe agrees with Jesus and actually extends Jesus' teaching further: loving God and neighbor "is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (12:33).

In other words, the central component of what Jesus has called "repent[ing] and believ[ing] in the good news" (1:15) is not participating in the temple (see Amos 5; Jeremiah 7). This scribe, a member of a group that has been central in opposing Jesus throughout the gospel, is now affirming one of the most controversial aspects of Jesus' mission.

Growing Opposition: The World (13:1–37)

Mark 13 is Jesus' second discourse in the gospel (see Mark 4 for the first). Jesus' disciples first ask about the destruction of the temple, and they take it as a given that when the temple falls, the end of the age will begin (13:1–4). Jesus' teaching, however, shows that many events must take place before the end comes, and he does not even know when this end will be (13:32; Author's Note 8). In fact, despite the disciples' first question, the focus of Jesus' teaching is not about *when* the end will come but more about what to do until that time: wait, watch, and witness (13:9–13, 28–37).

All That Is Gold

Jesus' teaching at the temple has indicated that all that glitters is not gold: outside appearances do not reveal what is inside. At the same time, there has been a different golden thread running through these texts. In J. R. R. Tolkien's book, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the character Aragorn is a figure who is the descendent of kings but does not yet claim the kingship for himself. Aragorn is described with a poem that begins, "all that is gold does not glitter." While we have been shown that all that glitters is not gold in these chapters of Mark, we also see gold that does not glitter. Jesus himself, the Messiah who fulfills and counters messianic expectation, who confounds and praises his opponents, and who predicts the end of the age yet does not know when it will occur, is gold that does not glitter.

Questions for Further Reflection:

1. According to these chapters in Mark, what are examples of things that glitter but are not gold? Are there ways in which you experience spiritual hypocrisy in your own life? On the other hand, in what ways is Jesus gold that does not glitter? Are there exceptions to these aphorisms (in other words, an example of gold that glitters) in these chapters?
2. When Jesus says, "render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (12:17), what do you think he means? What might this look like in our contemporary context?
3. What do you find challenging about the first and second greatest commandments? How do you obey them? How have you disobeyed them? Throughout the remainder of Lent, what action steps can you take to keep these commandments more fully?
4. What messages does Mark 13 convey to the church today?

Author's Note 1

There were various expectations of a Messianic figure based on first-century Jewish texts, but one important text describing the Messiah's role comes from a text about 100 years before Jesus, the *Psalms of Solomon* 17. There, the Messiah is clearly described as a king who reigns over Jerusalem and purifies the city, especially the temple, when he arrives.

Author's Note 2

Mark actually says that Jesus calls the temple a "den of brigands," which is the same word used to describe the people with whom Jesus is crucified (15:27). This word commonly describes those Jews

who fought against the imperial power of Rome to achieve their independence by violent means. These revolutionaries were often arrested and crucified as traitors of Rome. From Jeremiah's perspective, the corruption was not that the temple leadership was embezzling temple funds or offering sacrifices in inappropriate ways. Instead, Jeremiah was most concerned with the fact that the people were perfectly happy to perform sacrifices in the temple and act in any way they pleased outside of it (thus, being robbers or brigands). In other words, the sacrifices they made in the temple were not reflected in sacrifices in their lives.

Author's Note 3

On this point, see E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

Author's Note 4

When Jesus curses the fig tree he also sheds light on the actions of the temple leadership, and not only on the temple establishment itself. The final episode of Jesus' teaching in the temple involves his observation of an impoverished widow whom Jesus praises for giving "all she had to live on" (Greek: "her whole life") to the temple (12:44). Before this teaching, however, Jesus has pointed out that the scribes "have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets [and] they devour widows' houses" (12:40). The temple leadership should never have put the widow in the position so that she had to give all she had to live on. They have deprived her of her life. As a parallel, Jesus demonstrates this action of depriving an innocent victim of its life by cursing the fig tree. Those who claim that Jesus' actions toward the fig tree are unjust are, in fact, correct. This enacted parable illuminates the unjust actions of the temple leadership by replicating them in a different setting.

Author's Note 5

Of course, these verses have been problematic for Jesus' disciples ever since Jesus uttered them. In fact, the unequivocal nature of Jesus' promises here — that a person could ask for whatever he or she wants in prayer, believing in its reception, and it will come to pass — runs up against Jesus' own experience in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–42). We will explore the tension between these two passages next week. For further reading, see also Sharyn Echols Dowd, *Prayer, Power, and the Problem of Suffering: Mark 11:22–25 in the Context of Markan Theology* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 105; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

Author's Note 6

The description of this man's actions comes from Isaiah 5:1–2, which describes Israel as a vineyard God loves and cares for, but which, despite God's conscientious care and green thumb, yields "wild grapes" rather than the expected, fruitful vines. Here, Jesus modifies this traditional metaphor of God's love for Israel. The man who purchased the vineyard leaves it in the hands of tenants while he is out of the country (11:2). This is a common practice in Palestine in the first century, but it also serves a point in the parable.

Author's Note 7

In the first-century political and economic environment, such rebellious action on the part of the lower-class tenants, who were effectively sharecroppers, could be understandable. Overlords, whether Gentile or Jewish, would not be looked upon favorably by most of the lower class, as the payment for working the land (what was due to the master, 12:2) could easily be high enough to ensure that the tenants could never leave for a better position elsewhere. Withholding the master's payment could be a form of economic, social, or political rebellion in an unjust system.

However, such a reading of this parable misses a central point. Rebelling against this particular master involves rebelling against God. While Jesus is using both a common Old Testament metaphor and a common first-century situation, this does not imply that he is supportive of the servitude of the lower classes (see, e.g., 12:38–40). Instead, the fact that the tenants in this parable symbolize the chief priests, scribes, and elders, means that these particular tenants are complicit in the unjust system and benefit from it, rather than being the ones taken advantage of by it.

Author's Note 8

The language of Mark 13 is that of apocalyptic literature, like the book of Revelation. This was a common genre of literature during the time of the New Testament. It uses symbols to describe heavenly realities and to explain their significance for events on earth. Mark is less concerned with predicting the precise events that are to take place in order to calculate when the end to come (see 13:32) and more concerned with the proper action his audience needs to take before the end.

Week 5: Week of March 18, 2012

Dinner, Distress, and Denial: Mark 14:1–72

“You know my methods, Watson. There was not one of them which I did not apply to the inquiry. And it ended by my discovering traces, but very different ones from those which I had expected.”

— A. Conan Doyle, “The Crooked Man,” in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* ((New York: A. L. Burt Company, Publishers, 1894), 145)

With the creation of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle developed a character that epitomized the ability to draw large inferences from small observations. The Sherlock Holmes stories operate on two levels: the narrator, often through the voice of Holmes’ sidekick, Watson, reveals part of the story, while Holmes pieces together the bigger picture behind the scenes.

With Chapter 14, Mark begins what is commonly called the “passion narrative,” describing the events leading up to and including Jesus’ suffering (passion), death, and resurrection (Mark 14–16). On the surface, these chapters appear to be the recitation of these basic events. However, if the early church had decided that Christians just needed to know that Jesus was arrested on false charges, was crucified by the Romans, and rose on the third day, there are many other ways to provide that knowledge beyond the lengthy accounts that the gospel writers give. Instead, the gospel writers chose a format that invites reflection at different points as the events unfold before our eyes.

This first glance at Mark’s passion narrative may seem like Watson’s storytelling: you get the basic events of the story. However, Mark also drops hints of a Holmes-like deduction process, where the episodes of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection point to a much bigger story than is on the surface of the gospel account itself.

When Watson told Holmes that he was astonished at Holmes’ powers of deduction, Holmes replied, “You see, but you do not observe” (A. Conan Doyle, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1892), 6).

With this admonition to observe in mind, we should remember to look beyond the surface to observe how the Markan passion narrative illuminates the deeper story.

Plots and Perfume (14:1–11)

Mark 14 begins by orienting readers toward the setting of Jesus’ impending arrest and death. The narrative of the gospel slows down considerably at this point; nearly all the rest of Mark’s gospel takes place over five days. Currently, we are two days before Passover, and readers get to overhear some of the plotting between the chief priests and the scribes.

They have wanted to arrest Jesus for some time now, both because he has been something of a nuisance to established authority figures (e.g., 3:6) and because he is acting in ways that could incite a revolution against Rome (e.g., 11:12–25). However, they have resisted arresting Jesus so far because of their fear of the crowds, and they give the same rationale here.

In the first century, during the festival of Passover, the population of Jerusalem swelled to two or three times its size. If authorities arrest a popular messianic figure who is proclaiming deliverance *during* the festival in which Jews celebrate their deliverance from Egypt, they know popular opinion will be against them. At the same time, the reader of the Gospel of Mark knows that something curious happens here: Jesus *is* arrested during the feast of Passover (14:43–52), even though that was not the authorities' plan. The chief priests and the scribes see, but they do not observe (see 4:12), as it appears that another plan, not their own, is at work (see also Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, p. 933).

We meet the chief priests again in another 10 verses, as Judas Iscariot, always identified as one of “the twelve,” contacts them in order to betray Jesus (14:10–11). Sandwiched between these stories is one of the gospel's last positive portrayals of service to Jesus. Running against the storyline of betrayal, arrest, and death, one anonymous woman pours all of a costly perfume onto Jesus' head (14:3; Author's Note 1).

While the woman's presence at this dinner gathering is socially unusual, the objections that bystanders make are not about her presence. Instead, they criticize the economy of her actions. She wasted the perfume, which could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. From the bystander's perspective, is that not better than pouring it on Jesus' head?

Jesus does not concede the logic of these objections. Instead, he connects this woman's action with the action of the widow at the temple (12:41–44). That widow gave her all to what Mark's audience knows is going to be a lost cause. The temple will be destroyed. There is no human honor or approbation for the widow's action. In fact, since the temple will be destroyed, her action does not even make sense.

Would she not be better off using her two small coins to buy herself food? Yet Jesus commends her devotion and her selfless giving, even as he critiques the temple establishment. Similarly, the woman in Mark 14 gives all of the costly ointment to a presumably “lost cause” — Jesus himself, because it prepares his body for burial (14:8). Jesus' death is as certain as the temple's demise, and honoring him deserves even greater commendation (14:9).

Passover (14:12–25)

When Jesus tells two of his disciples to prepare the Passover meal, and gives them specific instructions about who they should find and where they should go, we are not surprised when Jesus' words are fulfilled (14:12–16; see also 11:2–6).

We have seen this motif before in Mark, but it is especially important now, as Jesus is predicting the betrayal of one of his followers, which leads to Jesus' own death. Of course, this betrayal is a foregone conclusion to us: We already witnessed Judas leaving the others to offer the chief priests a way to arrest Jesus in return for money (14:11). This dramatic irony makes the disciples' objections (“Surely, not I?”) stand out all the more (14:19).

Jesus' prophetic pronouncement at the conclusion of this part of the meal is especially important for understanding how to observe, and not just see, the events of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus says, “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born” (14:21).

In other words, there are two primary forces at work propelling events to culminate in Jesus' death. The first force is actually the fulfillment of Scripture, or, God's will. There is a very clear sense that the Son of Man, Jesus, is following a "script" that prophesies the events that are to come.

Secondly, the Son of Man's betrayer, Judas, does not receive a "get out of jail free" card as though he were simply an actor playing a role, with no responsibility of his own. The Gospel of Mark, as Scripture in general, claims that God is involved in human affairs and humans are also responsible for their own actions. On this point, Jesus dies because Judas betrays him, Jewish authorities put him on trial and convict him, Romans crucify him, he accepts this fate, and God wills it. No one force rules out the others; they all function indistinguishably together.

Mark is quite clear that the meal between Jesus and his disciples is the Passover, but his narration of it contains none of the distinctive marks of a Passover meal, such as bitter herbs or the Passover lamb. Instead, Mark focuses on the most common aspect of the meal — bread and wine. Jesus' words over the bread and wine set them apart, signaling that they now have a different use. By eating this bread together, the disciples participate in Jesus' body and life (14:22). After sharing the wine, Jesus claims that this event establishes a covenant, or a solemn and sealed promise, between him and those who partake. It looks back to God's covenant with Israel, sealed in blood in Exodus 24, and it looks forward to the consummation of the kingdom of God (14:25).

Scripture and Gethsemane (14:26–42)

Upon leaving the upper room, Jesus and his disciples have another discussion. This time, Jesus cites Scripture to support his claim that all of his disciples will desert him. This quotation from Zechariah, slightly adapted by Mark, emphasizes *God's* role in Jesus' death. The "I" referred to, who will strike the shepherd (Jesus, see 6:34), is God.

The sheep, who in this case are Jesus' followers, will be scattered as a result of God's action. Nevertheless, just as all of Jesus' predictions of his passion and death included his resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34), so this prediction claims that Jesus will be raised from the dead, and will go ahead of his disciples into Galilee, where they first began their ministry (14:28).

The disciples do not acknowledge this prediction at all, but focus on their own reputations, claiming that they would not desert their teacher. Peter asserts an even higher plane of fidelity, but Jesus counters with a more dire prediction: "[B]efore the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice" (14:30, KJV).

With this ominous departure, Jesus and his three closest disciples withdraw to a place called Gethsemane. The disciples are to sit while Jesus prays (14:32), and they are to keep awake (14:34). Jesus' actions in this scene are in stark contrast to his demeanor in the rest of the gospel. While he has formerly been in control and exhibited such authority that the demons tremble before him, now he is trembling (14:33).

Where he has just soberly predicted his own fate and his disciples' desertion (14:27–31), now he is in the depths of grief (14:34). Jesus' emotions are not the only striking difference, however. In his prayer, and echoed in Mark's narration, Jesus asks God to "remove this cup" from him. The cup most likely refers to a "cup of suffering" (see 10:38–39). Despite knowing that the scriptures point to his death

(14:26–27), and knowing that death is not the end (14:28), Jesus still asks God to find another way because “all things are possible” for God (14:35, 36; compare 10:27).

Given Jesus’ previous teaching about praying with faith, there is reason to think that God would have answered this prayer affirmatively (11:22–25). However, Jesus did not end his prayer with this request, but rather with a submission to God’s will: “not what I want, but what you want” (14:36). Jesus prays this prayer three times; requests are not easily relinquished, and submission is not the work of a moment (14:41).

The storyline of the disciples nears its conclusion in Gethsemane. Instead of sitting and staying awake, according to Jesus’ instructions, the disciples fall asleep. This bodes ill on many counts: it places more weight on Jesus’ predictions of their desertion than on their assertions of fidelity; it increases Jesus’ emotional and physical solitude as he continues his journey towards death; and it recalls Jesus’ instructions to his disciples in Mark 13:32–37. Their task in the future, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, is to “keep awake,” watching for the Son of Man (13:33, 35, 37; NRSV’s translation is “keep alert”) lest the master “may find you asleep when he comes suddenly” (13:36). If the disciples cannot stay awake while Jesus is present, how will they fare in his absence [Author’s Note 2]?

Betrayal and Arrest (14:43–52)

When a crowd arrives with Judas, it is the first time large numbers of people have been present in the narrative since Jesus was teaching in the temple. At that time, the crowd “was listening to him with delight” (12:37). Now the crowd is brandishing swords and clubs. The favorable crowd has disappeared, and now Jesus is being arrested as though he were a “bandit,” or one who is plotting revolution against Rome (14:48; see 11:17).

Jesus points out this irony by referring back to the days earlier in the week when he was teaching in the temple (14:49) and could easily have been arrested there (compare 14:1–2). Ultimately, not only are the scriptures fulfilled (14:49), but so are Jesus’ words, as all his disciples desert him and flee (14:50–52; Author’s Note 3).

Trial and Denial (14:53–72)

Peter has not deserted Jesus completely; on the contrary, he is in the very courtyard of the building in which Jesus’ trial is taking place. This trial before the chief priests, elders, and scribes includes a tale of two testimonies. Jesus provides the first testimony and Peter gives the second.

Mark indicates that Jesus’ trial is a grave miscarriage of justice. Even witnesses who bring a charge against Jesus — namely, the destruction of the temple — are unable to corroborate their evidence. Finally, apparently seeking to explore Jesus’ connection to this charge of temple destruction to the utmost, the high priest inquires of Jesus whether he is “the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” or, in Mark’s terms, “are you the Christ, the Son of God?” (14:61).

For the first and only time in this gospel, Jesus answers this question forthrightly. Mark’s readers know the answer because the narrator has provided them with information withheld from the narrative’s characters. It is only here, on the cusp of his death, that Jesus can reveal his messiahship without apparent risk of misunderstanding. Of course, this revelation, paired with his prophetic adaptation of

words from Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13, is enough to convict him in his accusers' eyes (14:62). Jesus' testimony is true (contrast 14:65), and its effect is his death (14:64).

The second testimony, then, is Peter's. Asked three times about his relationship to Jesus, Peter swears that he does not know him. The servant-girl even inquires whether Peter is from Galilee, the very place Jesus has promised to meet his disciples after the resurrection, apparently reminding Peter — and Mark's audience — of Jesus' predictions (14:70; compare 14:28). Through his false testimony, Peter succeeds in avoiding physical death. By denying Jesus, he has killed a relationship that he left his home, his family, and his livelihood to pursue (10:28–30).

Sight and Observation

In each of the events that has occurred in this chapter, there is more to observe than can be known at first sight. What appears to be an anointing by an extravagant stranger is actually a prophecy preparing Jesus for death (14:3–9). What seems to be Passover becomes a meal with new covenantal significance (14:17–25).

What should be the next event on the journey to the cross for Jesus sends him into a paralyzing emotional and spiritual distress in Gethsemane (14:32–42). A true testimony earns a death sentence, while a false testimony allows another man to go free (14:53–72). Going beyond what one can see on the surface and looking in depth for what one can observe allow all facets of the story to emerge.

This is not simply a story about the death of a man at the hands of Romans and Jews in the first century. It is the story of God's will, realized through the scriptures, to send Jesus to death, in order to defeat death and sin and all that hold the world in bondage. Contrary to Sherlock Holmes' frequent declaration, it is *not* "elementary," but there is much to see, if we only observe.

Questions for Further Reflection:

1. Reread Mark 14:6–8 alongside Deuteronomy 15:11. What is Jesus saying about the poor? What distinction is he making about the appropriateness of the woman's action? What is the significance of Mark 14:9?
2. Jesus' experience in Gethsemane is powerful on many levels. How does Jesus' request to God to "remove this cup from me" shape your understanding of who Jesus is? What do you think Mark wants his audience to understand and learn from this text? Does Hebrews 5:7–8 make a different, or similar, point to Mark's? What does Mark's text teach us about prayer?
3. Spend some time rereading and reflecting on Mark 14:32–42. What things stand out to you about this portion of the narrative?
4. In Mark 14:21 and 49, Jesus says that "the Son of Man goes as it is written of him" and "let the scriptures be fulfilled," but he never specifies which scriptures he means. Which scriptures (if any in particular) do you think Mark has in mind? How should we understand these statements? (As a starting point, you might consider the Old Testament scriptures cited above, as well as the possibility of Isaiah 52:13–53:12.)

5. Much is made of Peter's denial in 14:66-72. What stands out to you about his story? Do you sympathize with him? Condemn him? What might we gain from this aspect of the crucifixion narrative?

Author's Note 1

We have many archeological examples of alabaster jars from the first century. They were vessels that had long necks with stoppers at the top. Their purpose was to preserve costly perfumes and ointments. The woman in Mark 14 breaks the thin neck of the jar, thereby indicating that none of this ointment was meant to be withheld. She gave all of it to Jesus.

Author's Note 2

Mark 13 already provides an answer to this question: the disciples will succeed not because of their innate spiritual qualities but rather because of the Holy Spirit, who will guide them and provide words for them when they come under trial (13:9–12). As in Acts 2, it is the Spirit that makes a difference in the post-resurrection church.

Author's Note 3

The identity and significance of the young man of Mark 14:51–52 has been a consistent question since the early church. Among other possibilities, this young man could function symbolically for all Jesus' followers who run away in shame (nakedness) at Jesus' arrest and impending death. However, a young man (the only other instance of the Greek word νεανίσκος in Mark's gospel) also appears at Jesus' tomb to announce the good news that Jesus is risen on Easter morning (16:5). In this way, the young man is the last to flee and the first to be restored to Jesus' companionship.

Week 6: Week of March 25, 2012

“And They Crucified Him:” Darkness Descends: Mark 15:1–47

Upside-Down

I clearly remember the first time I stood on my head as a child. I was fascinated by the way the world looked when I was upside down. The carpet or grass seemed much more intricate and detailed. People’s shoes took on interest, particularly if they came too close to my head. And, until I lost my balance, the upside-down world was a fun, if odd, place to be.

Unfortunately, we do not often think an upside-down world is fun as adults. In the past decade, many events have occurred in the public eye to convince us that we live in an upside-down world, whether we think of 9/11 in the U.S., tsunamis in the Pacific, an earthquake in Haiti, tornadoes and hurricanes, concerns over the economy and unemployment, or daily tragedies around the globe.

Personal lives may also be turned upside-down by events of smaller scale, but great individual importance, where disease, death, loss, or despair shakes one’s life. Scripture as a whole testifies to the fact that this world does not currently operate the way it should, and creation longs for a better day to come (e.g., Romans 8:18–23).

Mark’s story of Jesus’ death describes Jesus’ own experience with this upside-down world. In fact, Mark tells the story of Jesus’ Roman trial and death in a way that demonstrates how inverted everything is. The story drips with irony as the characters who oppose Jesus speak truths they do not recognize. Unexpected scriptures are fulfilled; the one who has now claimed to be the Messiah (14:61), the one who was supposed to turn the world upside-down and make it right again, is now, in upside-down fashion, being turned over to the Romans. All the same, it is within the allusions to Scripture and the ironic statements of Jesus’ opponents that the depth of this inverted story can be found.

Dying for Another: The Trial Before Pilate (15:1–15)

On Friday morning, the chief priests bring Jesus before Pilate, as they had no authority to execute Jesus on charges of treason. Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea during this time (26–36 AD), and it was his job to keep the peace — especially during an event like Passover, where riots were possible. The chief priests do not bring Jesus to Pilate based on just one charge, but instead list many charges against Jesus, none of which Mark preserves. Pilate asks Jesus about only one charge: “Are you the King of the Jews?” (15:2).

Jesus’ reply is an abbreviated sentence in Greek. Literally, Jesus says, “you say” (15:2). This is not good English, so translators have tended to render it in one of two ways:

1. “It is as you say” (NASB, NIV), where Jesus restates that he agrees with this charge, as he did with the chief priests’ question about his identity as the Messiah (14:61).
2. “You say so” (KJV, NRSV), where Jesus distances himself from the charge.

Given Jesus' reticence to accept various titles throughout the gospel and Pilate's conviction of his innocence of charges of treason, the latter translation seems more appropriate. These are some of the last words Jesus says in the gospel; he speaks no more at his trial (15:5).

Mark describes Pilate as being amazed at Jesus (15:5). He decides to ask the crowds, who have been in favor of Jesus and his teaching (e.g., 12:37) to request Jesus' release. Since there is no substantial case against Jesus, this makes judicial sense.

In an irony of ironies, however, the crowd chooses Barabbas over Jesus. Mark tells us that Barabbas is a convicted murderer and revolutionary, willing to bring about a new order in society by violent means. The Romans then release the prisoner who threatens their overthrow and instead seek to kill one who has not acted like a revolutionary, even though he was arrested like one (14:48; Author's Note 1). In this way, Jesus, the innocent man, dies in place of one who deserved death. Jesus' crucifixion has intensely corporate and political ramifications, but it also has profound personal consequences for Barabbas and all who stand in his place.

Jesus is convicted and handed over on the charge that the people hail him as their king, the King of the Jews. This is yet another way to say that Jesus has come as the Messiah, the chosen one, a king like David (compare 12:35–37), who will deliver Israel from its Roman occupation and restore independent rule once more.

Pilate himself asks Jesus if he is this king, as we noted above (15:2). He also asks the people what they want him to do with this one they call the King of the Jews (15:9, 12). In fact, Jesus will be called king three more times in this chapter, making a total of six occurrences of the title (15:18, 26, 32), all of them in this chapter of Mark.

In other words, Mark is sending a subtly ironic message. Jesus is falsely accused of being the kind of king who revolts to overthrow Rome with violent means, achieving a political revolution but little else. Instead, Jesus is a king with more power than Caesar (compare 9:2–9), but that power is expressed not by ruling or revolting, but by giving his own life in the place of others. Sacrificially, he saves his life, and the lives of others, by losing his life (8:34–38). Jesus turns the world of kingship upside down when he reigns on a cross rather than on a throne.

Mockery and Crucifixion (15:16–32)

After the soldiers flog Jesus at Pilate's command, they proceed to mock Jesus in light of the kingly charge for which he is being killed. Only royalty could afford to wear purple, so putting a kingly robe on him and a crown, not of jewels but of thorns, and hailing him as king ironically mock the one who is their king (15:16–20).

As they compel Jesus to march out to Golgotha [Author's Note 2], the soldiers find that Jesus is too weak from the floggings, the mockery, the suffering, and the previous sleepless night to carry his own crossbeam to be crucified. Despite many of the depictions in Christian art, victims to be crucified would not carry a whole cross on their shoulders, but instead would carry only the horizontal crossbeam. The vertical beam would already be on site, in this case, at Golgotha, awaiting its victim.

Since Jesus cannot carry his own cross, the Romans recruit Simon of Cyrene, who was probably a Jew visiting Jerusalem for Passover. Mark gives the names of his sons, Alexander and Rufus, as though these names were known to his audience. Some scholars think it is likely that Alexander and Rufus became part of the Christian community for whom Mark was writing his gospel, and therefore the community could appeal to them for more details of their father's experience (15:21).

Furthermore, even though Jesus has exhorted his followers to carry their own crosses, we see that he cannot carry his own, and another in the community must share the burden and help him carry it. The cross does not become Simon's, but Simon is willing to shoulder the load and follow Jesus all the same. This scene provides a dynamic portrayal of the role of shared discipleship in the kingdom of God in the days to come.

Unlike many later retellings of Jesus' crucifixion, Mark narrates the event quite plainly: "it was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him" (15:25). Instead of providing grisly details about the crucifixion that would have been all too familiar to his first-century audience, Mark focuses on those who witness Jesus dying. The mockery of the soldiers (15:16–20) has been just the beginning.

They continue ridiculing Jesus as the King of the Jews by posting a sign above his head (15:26). Bystanders allude to the charge against the temple that was brought up at Jesus' trial (15:29), but here the claim is stated ironically: You claimed the temple was going to be turned upside down, with no stone left on another (13:1–2). The temple is still standing, but you cannot even save yourself (15:30). Of course, ironically, it is by *not* saving himself that Jesus in fact saves others.

This point of irony continues through derision of the chief priests and scribes, who recognize that Jesus has saved others (see 5:34; 6:56; 10:52), and in order to continue saving others, saving himself by coming down from the cross is not an option. Furthermore, such action would not actually promote their faith, despite their claim. Their problem, as we have seen earlier in Mark, is that they can see the events, but they do not perceive or observe their significance (see Mark 4:12). They speak truth without perceiving it.

Finally, Mark concludes his description of those around Jesus by pointing out that even the revolutionaries ("bandits") crucified with him, who were seated at his right and left hand (15:32; see 10:40), mocked Jesus. In other words, at the end of his life, Jesus was utterly forsaken by all who were around him. The one who had drawn crowds so widely they could not get home to eat (6:34–44; 8:1–10) and who was sought out even by Gentiles for healing (7:24–30) is left to die alone [Author's Note 3].

Death and Burial (15:33–47)

As readers of Mark's gospel know by now, Jesus' death is not just the death of another crucified criminal [Author's Note 4]. Mark shows that Jesus' death is different by marking it with two different kinds of allusions:

- First, there are scriptural allusions laced throughout this story.
- Second, there are allusions to the cosmic battle between God and evil that is being waged, and the battleground is "the Place of the Skull" (Golgotha) itself.

Jesus has said that events are proceeding according to the scriptures (14:21, 49). In the account of his death, Mark alludes to more scriptures, and often unexpected ones. Scriptures are evoked when the soldiers divide lots for Jesus' garment (Psalm 22:19), when the chief priests and scribes cannot perceive what they see (Isaiah 6:10), when Jesus cries that God has forsaken him (Psalm 22:1), and when the whole earth is enveloped in darkness (Amos 8:9–10) [Author's Note 5]. The latter passage is worth quoting in full:

On that day, says the Lord GOD,
I will make the sun go down at noon,
and darken the earth in broad daylight.
I will turn your feasts into mourning,
and all your songs into lamentation.
I will bring sackcloth on all loins,
and baldness on every head;
I will make it like the mourning for an only son,
and the end of it like a bitter day. (Amos 8:9–10)

Mark is clearly saying that God's day has come, and it is a day that has brought darkness, not light as the people desired (Amos 5:18–20). The darkness at Jesus' death indicates a time of mourning, as well as a time where evil looks like it triumphs over God. Even this day, God's day, has been turned upside-down.

As Jesus dies, two unusual events occur away from the cross itself. First, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (15:38). This symbolic act alludes to Jesus' prediction of the temple's destruction (13:1–2), but its significance is even deeper than that prophecy. Scholars generally assume that the curtain Mark mentions is the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple.

The Holy of Holies was the place where God was envisioned to come down on the Ark of the Covenant, and where the priest would make the atonement offerings once a year (on Yom Kippur; see Luke 1:8–23 for an example). The curtain between this place and the rest of the temple has now been ripped from top to bottom, implying that a force above, in other words, from heaven, tore the curtain.

Furthermore, the same verb that was used to describe the rending of the heavens (1:10) is used here once again, and only here, in Mark. God rends the heavens to proclaim that Jesus is the beloved Son at Jesus' baptism, and God tears the temple curtain, in silence, at Jesus' death (15:38).

Tearing the temple curtain is significant in several ways. First, as has often been said, tearing the temple veil opens the way for all — Gentile and Jew, sinner and Pharisee — to seek the presence of God (see Hebrews 4:14–16; 10:19–22). Second, tearing the temple veil means that the presence of God is no longer confined to one sacred space. As scholar Donald Juel famously said, "God is on the loose" (*A Master of Surprise* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 120). The same God who surprises Israel by sending a Messiah who does *and does not* look like a Messiah is now out of the temple, acting in surprising ways everywhere.

The second unusual event at Jesus' death is the comment by the centurion, an official in the Roman army. This centurion, seeing how Jesus died, says, "Truly this man was God's Son" (15:39). This is the confession Mark has prepared his audience for from the beginning of the gospel (1:1), which has been given only by God's voice (1:11; 9:7) or the voices of unclean spirits (e.g., 3:11). Yet it is found on the lips

of a true outsider, a non-Jew, a commanding member of the army oppressing the Jews. What an upside-down world [Author's Note 6].

Jesus' burial is narrated briefly. Mark highlights some important historical facts: Jesus has died relatively quickly (15:44), and Joseph, a member of the council who had unanimously voted for Jesus' death (14:64), boldly asks Pilate for Jesus' body (15:43) and places him in a new tomb.

We learn that Jesus has had female followers ever since the beginning of his ministry in Galilee (15:40–41), and these women will play a significant role in the narrative to come. For now, we know that they did not desert Jesus as the male disciples did (14:50), though they do not stand close to the cross in the Gospel of Mark (compare John 19:25–27). They observe where Joseph lays Jesus' body, for they will return to prepare it adequately for burial, ameliorating the hasty burial Joseph has given Jesus as the Sabbath approaches.

Upside-Down Again

Only God could take an upside-down world and turn it upside-down again and bring redemption. The cross, an instrument of torture and death emphasizing the power and authority of the Roman empire, will become a symbol of salvation and sacrifice. But for now, in Mark, it is the Sabbath. Darkness and death have the last word today, but only today. Weeping does remain for the night (Psalm 30:5). The women know where the tomb is, but today they rest in the grief of this upside-down world.

Questions for Further Reflection:

1. Mark has been building up to the suffering and death of Jesus for many chapters now. Why do you think that lingering here, at the cross and the tomb, is so important? What do we miss if we read straight on to Mark 16, without stopping here?
2. Read Psalm 22. How does it reflect Jesus' experience at Golgotha?
3. Is Jesus actually forsaken by God at the cross (15:34)? What evidence do you find one way or the other? What difference does this make for your own faith?
4. Take some time to reflect on this Lenten season. What has God revealed to you about your journey of discipleship, your role in the body of Christ, or about God Himself?

Author's Note 1

In Mark 14:48, Jesus asks the crowd, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit?" As in Mark 11:17, the word "bandit" (ληστής) also means "revolutionary" or "insurrectionist." In Mark 14:48, this term looks back to Jesus' critique of the Jewish leadership at the temple, and forward to the revolutionary he will free by dying in Barabbas' place.

Author's Note 2

Mark translates the Aramaic name for his audience as he says that Golgotha means “the place of a skull” (15:22). This alludes to the geographic formations of the place, where the rocks form the shape of a human skull. In Mark, however, it also gives an ominous tone to the narrative.

Author's Note 3

Mark will later mention women who are watching Jesus' death and burial from a distance (15:40).

Author's Note 4

Given the prevalence of the cross as a symbol in 21st-century culture, it is easy to forget that the cross was an instrument of capital punishment. The victim was either roped or nailed to a beam suspended in the air. The person would usually die from asphyxiation, though dehydration was also a possible cause of death. The inability to breathe usually rendered the crucified one weak and senseless by the time of death. It was a painful and publicly humiliating way to die.

Author's Note 5

Some have tried to explain the earth's complete darkness at noon by means of scientific phenomena. Solar eclipses are scientifically impossible at this point in the calendar, however, as they cannot occur during a full moon, and Passover is always held during the full moon. The darkness at Jesus' death is not the kind of darkness that can be rationally explained. It is a darkness of supernatural origin.

Author's Note 6

The centurion's comment could also be taken sarcastically: “Truly *this man* was God's son?!? [Yeah, right!]” In this way, Mark would be demonstrating that even after Jesus' death, people continue to speak ironically, not perceiving the truth in what they are saying. In light of the gospel as a whole, I think Mark has good reason to leave the intent behind this confession ambiguous: The audience knows the centurion is confessing the truth, as it is in Jesus' death that he exemplifies what it means to be God's Son, King of the Jews, and the Son of Man.

Given the general ignorance of this truth by the characters within the gospel, as well as Jesus' promise that the disciples will understand more (though not all) after his resurrection (9:9), whether the centurion intended to offer a Christian confession of Jesus' identity remains up for debate. Either way — as ironic or forthright — the confession continues to turn the world upside-down.