Today we’ll conclude our overview of Mark’s narrative, still attempting to understand why Mark reports that it was seeing the way Jesus died that prompted the centurion to acclaim him “son of God.” It’s clear that, as Kingsbury says, the cross is the culmination of Mark’s Gospel. And he is correct to point to the centurion’s confession as the climax. But he fails, in my view, to grapple with what prompted that confession: the way that Jesus died.

We’ve noted that Mark concludes the first major section of his gospel with a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples culminating in Jesus’ exasperated question, “Do you not yet understand?” which hearkens back to his exclamation upon discovering that the disciples thought his warning about the “leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” was a reprimand for forgetting to bring bread: “Do you still not perceive or understand?”

That sets the stage for the second major unit, in which the question of understanding Jesus dominates. You’ll recall that this unit has two stories that serve as bookends, both narrating scenes in which Jesus cures a man of blindness. As you’ll also recall, this section is punctuated by three occasions on which Jesus tries to apprise his disciples of what awaits him in Jerusalem, and each time they refuse to accept it, showing themselves to have as much difficulty comprehending Jesus on this score as do others. And yet, their failure to understand is both more deliberate and more precise. While those outside are simply at a loss as to how to categorize Jesus, the disciples have been privy to information not available to others, and yet refuse to accept all that Jesus tries to tell them about who he is.

But there is more going on in this section. It is here, above all, that Jesus instructs his disciples about what it means to follow him. In fact, one might justifiably say that this section is not simply about understanding Jesus, but also about understanding discipleship. However, that double focus does not create a compound object of knowledge (Jesus and discipleship), because for Mark the two are inextricably bound. While Mark writes in biographical form, portraying Jesus and people’s responses to him so as to provide an image of who Jesus was, that image is not mere information, but a prod to discipleship. We’ve already noted some ways Mark speaks directly to his audience, as in his aside to the reader in chapter 13, “Let the reader understand.” But Mark also addresses his readers more subtly in his portrayal of the disciples and their interactions with Jesus.

A perennial question in the study of Mark is why the disciples come off so poorly in this Gospel. They’re always failing to understand Jesus, even
when given unique insight. And then, of course, in chapter 8 Peter initially scores points by answering Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” with the confession, “You are the Messiah.” But then he quickly runs afoul when Jesus speaks of his approaching suffering and death: “And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Like the blind man Jesus healed in the preceding story, Peter begins to see, but with blurred vision: he understands Jesus to be the Messiah, but cannot accept Jesus’ detailing of what that means for him. Like the blind man, Peter sees without clear definition.

It’s important to notice here that Jesus’ first response to Peter’s rebuff is to “turn and look at his disciples,” a statement that must be viewed against the earlier report that “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” Peter’s disagreement with Jesus is not voiced in the midst of the disciples, but aside from them. And yet, Jesus takes all the disciples into consideration before uttering his harsh rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” -- That signals that Jesus’ words are not simply a response to Peter’s words, but to a misunderstanding that could infect all his disciples; he speaks so as to be heard by all.

And that perception is confirmed in the two other occasions Jesus speaks of his upcoming suffering. The conclusion to the report of Jesus’ second warning of what lies ahead is that “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

But the problem for the disciples runs deeper than that, for immediately on the heels of that statement, Mark lets the reader in on a nasty secret about the disciples’ interests that run across the grain of Jesus’ warning: “33Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.”

If Peter refused to accept the notion that Jesus was fated for suffering and death, the disciples as a whole cannot help themselves from thinking that their association with Jesus makes it prudent to jostle for preeminence; discipleship is about who’s on top. And this isn’t the only time this flawed understanding of discipleship arises.

Indeed, the third occasion of Jesus forecasting his fate in Jerusalem is interrupted by a special request from two disciples: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” -- Discipleship is not simply about preeminence, but also about rank.
So each time Jesus signals what will happen in Jerusalem, the disciples respond with a conception of discipleship that either explicitly or implicitly rejects suffering in favor of rosy anticipation of glory. And this belief infects all the disciples, which is why Jesus prefaces his rebuke of Peter in chapter 8 by a glance back at the lot of them. In fact, Jesus’ response in that case is broader than just his rebuke of Peter. Mark reports Jesus’ next move as follows: “34He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Not only is Jesus destined to suffer and die, but so also are those who follow him. Notice that Mark introduces this exposition of discipleship with Jesus enlarging his audience: not just his disciples, but also the crowd. This teaching of what it takes to be Jesus’ disciple is appropriate not only for those already his disciples, but also for those contemplating it.

Indeed, let’s back up and notice that when Jesus poses his question about who people say he is, he addresses a group identified simply as “them,” but earlier given a more precise definition: “Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

As we’ve seen, in chapter three Jesus chose 12, designating their role as those who are “sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.” It is this special role that earns them the title “apostles,” a Greek word that means “ones sent out.” But that alone is their distinction within the mass of Jesus’ followers.

While, as you might have noticed, they are also said to have been chosen “to be with Jesus,” which might suggest a special relationship to Jesus beyond this mission, Mark does not substantiate that inference in his narrative.

In fact, recall that in the next chapter, after Jesus has addressed to the crowds the parable of a sower who scattered seed on different types of soil, with different results, he retreats into seclusion with his followers: “When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.” It is not just to the twelve that he expounds the parable, but to “those who were around him along with the twelve.” And recall that
he begins his explanation with the reassurance, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables.”

One place the twelve seem, at first blush, to be specially singled out follows the second occasion Jesus attempts to forewarn his disciples of his passion. As you’ll recall, Mark introduces Jesus’ instruction with the report, “He did not want anyone to know it; 31 for he was teaching his disciples.” So here we again find Jesus speaking privately with the group designated as “his disciples.” It is this group that is said not to understand and to be too afraid to ask for clarification. And it is with this group that Jesus subsequently arrives at Capernaum and enters a house, where he asks them what they were talking about on the way, although they are reticent to admit that they had been debating which of them was greatest. So it is surprising to hear next that Jesus “sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” In fact, several peculiarities stand out, the first of which is why Jesus, after having this interaction with a group labeled simply “his disciples,” now singles out the twelve for special instruction on what, according to the narrative, had been under discussion among all his disciples.

A second peculiarity is that Jesus is said to summon the twelve only after he and his disciples have arrived in the house at Capernaum. If we take seriously this distinction between the disciples and the twelve, then we must imagine Jesus separating the twelve from the other disciples who have already entered the house with him and finding a private corner in which to instruct them. But again, the preceding narrative has the debate raging among the disciples as a whole, not just the twelve.

A further peculiarity is the way Jesus’ instruction on service as the basis of discipleship is introduced with the report, “He sat down, called the twelve and said to them.” This is a formal introduction to a report of Jesus teaching, much as we’ll find in the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.” It was commonplace in Jesus’ day for a teacher to be seated before beginning to speak. Accordingly, v. 35 gives the appearance of being the original introduction to Jesus’ words about servanthood.

Conversely, vv. 33-34 are likely a seam or link Mark forged to bridge between the narrative of Jesus teaching his disciples about his approaching death and this instruction on discipleship. One indication of that – besides the suspicions already aroused by what amount to two introductions to
Jesus’ teaching – is uniquely Markan vocabulary used in this seam. In particular, let’s notice Mark’s distinctive use of the phrase “on the way.”

While that short phrase might seem unremarkable, it is distinctive to seams Mark uses to join stories in this narrative of Jesus’ circuitous journey to Jerusalem. The journey begins in Bethsaida, where Jesus uses that two-step process to heal a blind man, after which he travels north to Caesarea Philippi, where Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah takes place, then south to Capernaum, after which Jesus and his retinue pass south and east through Galilee to the district across the Jordan, and then they cross the Jordan to Jericho, where Jesus heals the second blind man. In chapter 11 they arrive at the outskirts Jerusalem and Jesus arranges for a donkey on which to ride into the city.

Of course, Mark isn’t the only evangelist to include a travel narrative. You’ll recall that Luke has his own travel narrative in 9:51-8:14, composed of Q and L materials. A feature that distinguishes Mark’s travel narrative, however, is the way he ties it together with the phrase, “on the way,” which both Matthew and Luke typically drop. Consequently, this phrase becomes significant in detecting how Mark has arranged and shaped Jesus’ instruction on discipleship, especially in passages that mention both the larger group of disciples and the smaller group of the twelve – as we’ll see.

What’s more, this phrase, “on the way,” appears in the context of each of these pivotal moments when Jesus identity, especially as defined by suffering and death rather than ruling, is under discussion. In the case at hand, it appears twice in reference to what the disciples were debating “on the way,” concurrent with Jesus’ presaging his upcoming passion.

The scene in which Peter acknowledged Jesus’ as Messiah, but then was rebuffed for his objection to Jesus’ forecast of suffering, is introduced this way: “Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

The final scene of this type, in chapter 10, where Jesus again warns of his upcoming fate, begins this way: “Now they were on the way, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve aside again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him.” -- Again we find this typically Markan phrase, “on the way” in the context of a treatment of Jesus’ identity, especially the inevitability of this death. But notice that, as in chapter 9, Jesus “takes aside the twelve.” However, the distinction between the twelve and the rest of the disciples at this point is due to Mark’s creation of a redactional seam and therefore illusory. I’ll explain.
Notice the contrast: those left behind when Jesus takes aside the twelve are “those who followed [and] were afraid.” The phrase “those who followed” is not equivalent, in Mark’s vocabulary, to “the disciples.” In fact, notice that “those who followed” are distinguished from the prime subject of the sentence, the “they” who traipsed after Jesus, as well as the “they” who were amazed “Those who followed in fear” seem to constitute a distinct group. So who are those designated as “they?”

The last identification of those surrounding Jesus is in vv. 23-24, after a potential disciple turned back for love of money: “Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words.” So the “they” and “them” in 10.32 would seem to be still this group of disciples in general.

So when we read of this second group, “those who followed in fear,” they are equivalent to the crowds, as elsewhere, such as in 2.15, where Mark reports that “as [Jesus] sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him.” The report that “there were many who followed him” explains why “many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples.” Notice that again the disciples are associated with Jesus, and thus distinguished from this general group of followers, just as in chapter 10 those following fearfully are something of hangers-on.

What I want to suggest is that, just as 9.35 is the original beginning of Jesus’ teaching about servanthood, so the report “And taking the twelve aside again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him” is the original introduction to the tradition of Jesus’ teaching here. The arguments for this hinge to a large degree on Mark’s choice of Greek words and constructions, but let me highlight three features that signal that Mark composed the first two thirds of v. 32 as a seam to bind the preceding narrative to this scene.

Of course, as we have noticed, we have the phrase, “on the way,” frequently found in Markan seams in this large middle section.

Second, the introduction of 10:32 with “Now they were” – in Greek, Ἡσαν δὲ – finds numerous parallels in Mark whenever he wants to introduce a new stage in his story, as e.g. in chapter 2, where we find Markan redaction in the story of the paralytic lowered through the roof of a house. You’ll recall that this story is among Mark’s series of conflict narratives, culminating in the plot to kill Jesus. Without getting into the fine points that support this conclusion, Mark has inserted the debate over Jesus’ authority to forgive sins into the midst of the story of the healing of the paralytic. And the way he has done so is by creating a seam that begins
with, “Now some of the scribes were sitting there.” The Greek phrase is again, ἧσαν δὲ. So Mark’s use of this phrase in redactional seams is a second factor leading us to find in the first two thirds of 10.32 another Markan seam.

A third signal favoring this conclusion is the verbal phrase attached to “Now they were”: namely, “going up to Jerusalem.” One characteristic of Markan redactional seams is that he creates them by drawing on phrases in the tradition at hand. In this case, Mark has adopted the phrase “going up to Jerusalem” from the beginning of Jesus’ words that follow.

In both chapter 9 and chapter 10, then, Mark has let stand the phrase “the twelve” that he inherited from tradition. And he has done so in spite of the problems that makes for anyone reading closely. That is not unusual for Mark or any other redactor in the ancient world. I can show you time and again that a redactor has chosen to retain the tradition in the form in which he received it rather than modify it, even when doing so creates minor problems.

To give just one other example of Mark doing so, in 1.24 a demon being exorcised by Jesus exclaims, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” The title “the Holy One of God” appears only here and is close enough in form to his favorite title, “the son of God,” that one might have expected him to change it, especially since in chapter 3 he uses that title in his own summary of Jesus’ exorcisms: “Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, “You are the Son of God!”” The presence of “the Holy one of God” in 1:24, because of its singularity, suggests Mark preserved the title he found in the tradition.

That seems also the best explanation for why we find references to “the twelve” in 9.35 and 10.32, in spite of the difficulties they present: they were already part of the tradition Mark inherited. The only word Mark seems likely to have inserted into the tradition in 10.32 is “again.” In fact, this is a word that appears far more often in Mark than in Matthew and Luke combined, the numbers being 17x in Matthew, 28x in Mark, and only 3x in Luke. While the lower frequency of “again” in Matthew and Luke is doubtless due partly to their desire to smooth out some of Mark’s infelicities, the high frequency of these words in Mark is not accidental. A recent study has pointed out that this word is one of the tools Mark uses to structure his narrative, introducing Jesus’ resumption of an action. Here Mark inserts it to signal Jesus’ renewed attempt to warn his disciples about his impending passion.
But it is, above all, Mark’s retention of the phrase, “the twelve,” in 10.33 that signals Mark’s intent. Even though Mark received traditions that emphasized the role of the twelve, he set them in contexts that, by-and-large, diminished the role of the twelve in favor of all the disciples. Even where individual figures – such as Peter – are mentioned they are significant not in-and-of-themselves, but as examples of Jesus’ followers. And here we have to put out of our mind the way other gospels give special status to members of the twelve.

E.g. while in chapter 8 Peter is the one to confess Jesus to be the Messiah, he receives no special commendation. That comes only in Matthew, where Jesus responds with a blessing on Peter and the pronouncement, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

Similarly, even though Peter is the disciple who fails Jesus at his trial by denying him, Mark says nothing of Peter’s restoration by Jesus, such as is found in John 22, where Jesus reaches out specially to Peter after the resurrection, or even as intimated in Luke 22, where Jesus tells Peter, “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” -- Mark shows no interest in ascribing a lead role to Peter, nor in spotlighting any of the other individual figures he mentions, such as James and John. For him, they are merely individual characters in the group of Jesus’ disciples, and thus representative of the whole.

This helps us to understand why Mark concentrates on instructions to disciples in these central chapters. It’s not necessarily that Mark believed that that’s precisely what Jesus did at this stage of his work, but Mark was concerned with the run-of-the-mill followers of Jesus in his own day. Jesus’ instruction to his disciples is instruction for Mark’s readers; they, too, are invited to hear Jesus give instruction about what it means to be his disciple.

So what does it mean to be one of Mark’s readers and receive this invitation to listen? Above all, it means being tacitly warned not to be as thick-headed as the disciples when it comes to understanding discipleship. In particular, it means understanding that discipleship is not about advantage, but about service of others.

No less than twice is an attempt by Jesus to inform his disciples about lies ahead thwarted by their discussions of who is greatest among them or who will get the privileged positions in the new age. In the second of those cases, following the passage we’ve just looked at in 10.32-34, James and John take Jesus aside to request positions of privilege in his kingdom. Once the others catch wind of what they have requested, a dispute arises, which Jesus quells
by assembling the disciples and saying, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Notice that Jesus grounds his mandate that his disciples serve each other in his warnings about his inevitable death, which he characterizes here as a “giving” of his life on behalf of others. Just as Jesus’ identity is best revealed in his death, so also his mission is best defined by his suffering for the benefit of others. The word “ransom” suggests that Jesus’ death is the means by which others are rescued, but [contrary to Kingsbury] I don’t find Mark spelling out in what sense that is true. Mark seems more content to allow the idea of Jesus’ suffering as a benefit to others stand as the example of what it means to be a servant, without detailing what effects Jesus’ death had for others. It is the giving of his life for many that is the important assertion for Mark. While undoubtedly at an earlier stage the tradition Mark inherited was interested in this interpretation of Jesus’ death as a ransom, Mark does not choose to pick up on or develop that element in the tradition – even as Mark utilized a story about a demon who called Jesus “the Holy One of God” but makes no use of that title.

Mark emphasizes the same theme in chapt. 9, where he follows up Jesus’ second attempt to instruct his disciples about his passion with a redactional seam informing us that the disciples, at the moment Jesus was trying to presage his passion, were debating which of them was greatest. It is at this point Mark inserts Jesus’ words about humble service: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Servanthood is here defined as embracing those regarded as worthless by society, which is how children were viewed in the ancient world. And then, to emphasize the point, Mark tags on an illustrative episode: “John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.”
I.e. discipleship is no more about scrutinizing the validity of other groups of disciples than it is about determining the pecking order within your own group. Here Mark likely applies the tradition of Jesus’ teaching to his audience’s situation, in which (as we know was as true in early Christianity as in the subsequent centuries) disputes had arisen as to whether this or that group truly belonged to the community of Jesus’ followers or not.

In fact, at the end of chapter 9, following on Jesus’ warning to be careful not to offend each other, given the coming fiery judgment, Mark’s Jesus admonishes, “For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” In light of the preceding instruction, those final words, “be at peace with one another,” are doubtless aimed at dissension among the various intended recipients of Mark’s gospel.

I want to highlight another prominent discipleship theme that is developed in this section and continues through the rest of Mark. Just as the disciples are to follow Jesus in their attitude of service to others, so also are they to anticipate that they will be forced to suffer Jesus fate; discipleship entails affliction.

You might recall that when James and John approach Jesus with their request for prime positions in his kingdom, after he has tried yet again to presage his impending passion, Jesus says, in apparent exasperation, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” -- There is good reason to understand “the cup” and “the baptism” Jesus speaks of here as metaphors for his passion. Nevertheless, James and John respond enthusiastically: “We are able.” And yet, Jesus’ response shows that he never meant this as a serious test for whether he would grant them their request: “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” -- Obviously, Mark’s Jesus views as naïve James and John’s boast that they are ready to endure what Jesus is about to, and yet he affirms that eventually they will follow him in this regard.

The same theme appears slightly earlier in a section emphasizing the arduous character of discipleship. Mark reports that a man came running up to Jesus as he was setting off on a leg of his journey, asking what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. When the man tells Jesus that he has kept all the commandments of the Torah since his youth, Jesus replies, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will
have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, the man was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

At this, reports Mark, “Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words.” -- In first century Palestinian Judaism, the rich were regarded as having an advantage, since they could afford all the sacrifices and rites the Torah required. The assertion that they would find entrance into the kingdom difficult came as a shock.

Mark’s Jesus expands upon this saying, making it encompass more than just the wealthy: “Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” -- The ability to leave all behind to follow Jesus is provided by God, not by human initiative.

Of course this itself constitutes instruction on discipleship, explaining why some choose to follow Jesus and others don’t. In particular, it deals with the question of why those who are wealthy rarely attached themselves to the Jesus movement. And, as you might recall, in the parable of the four types of soil Jesus tells at the start of chapter 4, one type of person Jesus says fails in faith is the one whose wealth distracts him.

And yet, there are rewards for those who give up all to follow, as comes to light in the next line, in which Peter says, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 29 Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Mark’s Jesus initially leaves open what is meant by “a hundredfold in this age,” and then fills it out with a list that has a familiar ring: “houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields.” -- Recall that early on in Mark, Jesus rejected his family who sought him out, redefining his family as those who, like him, do God’s will. Here again he promises a new family and, apparently, communal property among them. But Mark’s Jesus adds an important qualification: these will be accompanied “with persecutions.” One should not misunderstand, as if though following Jesus entails only gain; anyone who follows him can expect to experience persecution in the bargain.
That is why in chapter 8 Jesus challenges his disciples and the crowd, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” -- To follow Jesus is to follow in his steps of affliction; there is no avoiding that, in Mark’s vision of discipleship. And undoubtedly that was so because in Mark’s day, just before the final assault on Jerusalem, followers of Jesus were being persecuted. That explains also why Mark’s Jesus tries three times to convince his disciples that death awaits him: Mark’s readers, in particular, need to wake up to the implications of discipleship.

In fact, moving beyond this section of the book, you’ll recall that when we explored the eschatological discourse in considering dates for the Synoptic Gospels, we noted Jesus’ forecast for the end begins with a warning that his disciples will witness traumatic events that, nevertheless, will not mark the end: “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

And Jesus warns them that such “birthpangs” will entail affliction for them: “As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.” -- As I pointed out at the time we looked at this, the talk of the good news being proclaimed to all nations (which fits awkwardly in its context) suggests that by Mark’s day that task of Gentile evangelization was underway, while the warning about “standing before governors and kings because of me” also points in that direction. Jesus’ instruction about such matters continues: “When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

Again, even though this is phrased as advice for the future, the situation of Mark’s age is likely transparent. Some have come to experience what it means for brother to betray brother, parents their children, and children their parents. It’s in this context that Mark’s earlier intercalation of the story of the Pharisees’ rejection of Jesus between episodes of Jesus’ family seeking to silence him, becomes intelligible, especially when it is coupled with
redefinition of the family in terms of association with others who seek to do God’s will.

The counsel Mark’s Jesus gives to those facing such persecution is “not to worry about what you’ll say at trial, but rely on the Holy Spirit to provide the right words.” And to all, the admonition is to persevere, since “the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

In this light, it is equally significant that the highpoint of Mark’s passion narrative comes in the acclamation of Jesus as “son of God.” The phrase “in this way he breathed his last” points to what motivated the centurion’s confession. It does not look back to the report of the rending of the temple veil from top to bottom – even if that is a sign of divine lament at Jesus’ death (which I think is more likely than a signal the temple will be destroyed, à la Kingsbury). The centurion, after all, is said to have “stood facing Jesus,” so that “the way in which he died” has to do with Jesus’ demeanor upon his death. It is in the way he died – in dereliction on the cross, calling out to God – that revealed his true identity that had not been recognized by anyone but God or demons to this point in Mark’s gospel. Indeed, throughout the entire passion narrative, Mark’s Jesus provides an example for his followers when they face trial and death. For Jesus’ opponents, his death signaled their triumph – just as the persecutors of Mark’s readers likely interpreted their acts against Jesus’ followers as a just cause – but the centurion perceived that Jesus’ death revealed something more. And the same is true for those who, like Jesus, experience trial and even death.

Finally, it is in the light of Mark’s central purpose of instructing disciples or his age that we can understand the peculiar ending of his gospel. As you know, Mark concludes with the angel’s announcement to women who come to anoint the body, and the report that they fled in fear. As Michael Holmes reports, that dour ending prompted several attempts to rectify the situation. And, recognizing that none of those is likely the original ending, some have speculated that the original ending has been lost.

But if we understand Mark as written to support and stimulate faith among those who faced persecution, then perhaps Mark’s so-called truncated ending is deliberate. The effect for the reader is to leave the question of following Jesus open. Will the reader accompany Jesus back into Galilee, where they will face the same sorts of opposition and struggles that Jesus did? Do they understand that Jesus’ identity was formed by his suffering mission, and that their identity will come from that as well? Mark’s readership seems to be people who have begun the journey of discipleship, but whose stamina is being challenged. The gospel of Mark is
written to remind them of what discipleship is about: if Jesus’ own life was one of serving others and suffering for his mission, how can his disciples expect to fare better? And even if those outside the group of Jesus’ followers fail to perceive Jesus’ true identity, those inside know the truth. They have heard Jesus speak in private to his disciples about who he is and what his mission is. They have heard the centurion confirm what Mark confessed about Jesus at the outset of his gospel: he is the Son of God.

We can think of Mark’s gospel, then, as a biography not aimed at outsiders, to show them who Jesus was or to defend the faith, but aimed at those inside who need to be reminded – or even set right – in their understanding of Jesus and themselves as his disciples.