

Lent, a Time to Watch and Pray

By the time we get to the teachings found in Mark 13, Jesus has already pushed all the buttons that will take Him to the cross. He has demonstrated His power by casting out demons, healing the sick, and raising the dead. By these actions He has enraged Satan by overturning his work and freeing many of his captives. He has also gathered a sizeable following among the people, and made the religious and political leaders among the Jews jealous. He has inflamed them further by pointing out their hypocrisy and greed. Every time the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law have tried to trip Him up, by asking Him a divisive or seemingly impossible question--designed to make Him look bad-- Jesus has deftly escaped their snares and exposed their treachery. The fact that Jesus demonstrates an authority that His enemies cannot diminish or control frightens and infuriates them. When we peek ahead into the first verse of Mark 14, we see exactly where it is all headed: The second half of Mark 14:1 says, "The chief priests and the teachers of the Law were looking for a way to arrest Jesus secretly and put him to death." We are definitely on our way to the cross.

In light of His nearness to His sacrificial death, and in light of the traumatic events that surround it, Jesus chooses to teach on "last things," and to discuss events that will usher in His second coming. Some terrible things have happened in the past, will be happening in the near future, and will be seen again before the Lord returns to restore His kingdom. In the meantime, His word to His disciples and to us is to "watch out," "be on guard," "be alert," and to "watch" for His coming.

There are three main sections in Mark 13, and we will look at them one by one this morning. One of the main features of Jesus' preaching throughout this chapter is that it is designed to build tension and a feeling of suspense. Jesus speaks of things that will surely be interpreted by many to point to His return but He warns His disciples not to be taken in. The pattern we see here goes something like this: (1) Traumatic event. (2) Question: Does this mean the end has arrived?" (3) Answer: "No." "Don't be misled." Going through this pattern several times builds suspense until we get to the real signs of His return that are given near the end of the chapter.

Verses 1 to 4 lay the foundation for the discussion to follow. In verses 1-2 we are told Jesus and His disciples are leaving the Temple complex and that one of the disciples emotes regarding the grandeur and beauty of the buildings. Jesus responds by saying that all of it will be destroyed. Then in verses 3-4 we read: "As Jesus was sitting on the

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Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

The setting is significant because from their vantage point on the Mount of Olives, the disciples and Jesus have a clear view of the city. It's kind of like coming off the 17th Street Exit of I-99 and looking over the city of Altoona, or coming down cattfish ridge overlooking Hollidaysburg: the city and its most prominent buildings are spread out before you. The Disciples want to know, inquiring minds want to know: When will Jerusalem be destroyed? What events will mark the end of the world? When will Jesus come again?

As is often the case, Jesus does not answer their question as asked but uses their question as a springboard for some pretty heavy teaching. In the Today's English Version of the New Testament, verses 3-13 are given the sub-heading: "Troubles and Persecutions." In this first section of Mark 13, Jesus warns His disciples about troubles and persecutions they will soon encounter. Beginning at verse 5, we read:

Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

The first thing we notice in this section is that Jesus is looking beyond His death, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus places the disciples at a point where they are waiting for His return from heaven. They are also waiting, not just for the destruction of Jerusalem, but for the end (verse 7). In other words, Jesus is saying, "while you are waiting for the end of the world and for my second coming, these are the things you can expect to encounter and this is how you are to conduct yourselves during this time."

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Specifically, there will be wars and rumors of wars. Nations and kingdoms will war against each other. There will be earthquakes and famines in various places. It sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it? How are the disciples to respond to these things? How are we to respond? Jesus says, "Don't be alarmed;" these things can be expected, but they are just the beginning, like birth pains that an expectant mother feels before real labor pain begins. These are just warm-ups for the real thing. The first thing Jesus is telling us is not to panic when we see the world around us in an uproar. This is par for the course.

The other thing the disciples of Jesus can expect is persecution. The Communicators Commentary, published in 1982*, reported that approximately 60 percent of Christians at that time were living under persecution. With the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism worldwide, that percentage is even greater today. We Christians living in the United States and in other developed nations in the West are, at least for the moment, the exception to the rule. Most Christians now living are suffering or risking their lives daily to follow Jesus. And, as our culture becomes less Christian and more under the control of an atheistic, secular progressive agenda, we may find ourselves joining the persecuted majority soon enough. But even if it doesn't come to that in our life times, we can be sure that we will face troubles and that our faith will be tested. Some among us are being tested at this very moment. Jesus tells us to prepare ourselves for this and to condition ourselves to rely on the Holy Spirit to teach us what to say and what to do when trials of various kinds come. We need to remember: **Trials will come to all believers. Those who hold fast to Jesus until the end will be saved.**

The second major section of Mark 13 is found in verses 14-23, and the circumstances described here seem to be a combination of past, and near future events. Jesus says,

"When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong--let the reader understand--then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down or enter the house to take anything out. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that this will not take place in winter, because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now--and never to be equaled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them. At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and

false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect--if that were possible. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.

Verse 14 hearkens back to the 11th chapter of Daniel, where Daniel foresaw a time when an army would invade Jerusalem, desecrate the temple fortress, abolish the daily sacrifice, and set up something which Daniel calls, "the abomination that causes desolation." By the time Jesus speaks about this in Mark 13, something similar has already happened. In 168 B.C., the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, tried to destroy the Jewish religion by erecting an altar to Zeus over the altar of burnt offerings, sacrificing a pig, setting up brothels in the outer courts of the Temple, and issuing an edict banning Judaism. The infamy of this act would still be fresh in the memory of any Jew living at the time of Christ. But, Jesus warns that the past is about to be repeated and that Daniel's prophecy will be fulfilled once again. Actually it was fulfilled twice shortly after Jesus' death. In 40 A.D., the Roman Emperor Caligula ordered a statue of his image to be built on the altar of burnt offerings for worship by the Jews. Then, around 67 or 68 A.D., a group of Jewish Zealots staged a revolt in which they occupied the Temple, murdered a number of fellow Jews, and piled up the dead in the Holy of Holies.**

Jesus warns the believers to do two things when they see these things happening. First, Jesus warns them to flee the city without delay and then He warns them not to be deceived. Not even these terrible atrocities or the destruction of the city and Temple, which would occur in 70 A.D. were to be interpreted as signs of His return. Things would get bad and then they would get really bad, but still the end of the world would not come. Again believers are not to panic, not to be surprised; instead they are to prepare their hearts to accept these horrendous events and to hold fast to the Lord in the midst of them. **We cannot condone, but nor should we be surprised by the wickedness and violence of man. We must stand fast in Christ as we await His great salvation.**

The third and final section of Mark 13 is found in verses 24-37. Here Jesus says, "*But in those days, following that distress, 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'*" *"At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these*

things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back--whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

It seems to me that it isn't until we come to this last section of Mark 13 that we are given specific signs that relate to the Second Coming of Christ. Wars, rumors of war, earthquakes, famines, the desecration and destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, all of these things will happen and have happened, and will probably happen again, but the end is not yet. But when the sun and moon are darkened, and stars begin to fall to earth, and the orbits of the planets are disturbed, then we best pay attention to the sky. No man knows the day or hour of the Lord's return, but to be forewarned is to be forearmed. We are instructed to watch and be ready, because we do not know at what season or at what time of day the Lord will return. Would you say, "Let us keep watch," "for in a moment unexpected," "the Lord will come."

*The Communicator's Commentary, Volume 2: Mark, David L. McKenna, ©1982 by Word, Inc., p. 266

**Ibid. p. 269

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Mark 13:3-37

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