

Olivet Discourse, Part One

Mark 13:1–8

We return to the Gospel of Mark today after a two-month hiatus for Advent and a focus on our core values. Let's recall to mind that the Mark's Gospel breaks into two major sections. The first is introduced in opening verses of Chapter 1: The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.¹ Thus begins Jesus' teaching ministry as he introduces himself, if you will, as the Son of God. That brings us to Mark 8 where the second section begins. Jesus asked his disciples who people said that he was. In other words, are they seeing who I am? The Father reveals the fullness of Christ to Peter: "You are the Christ." Now that they know that, Jesus calls them to follow him, forsaking every *passing* thing. That call to discipleship is written over the back half of the Gospel: If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.² So the second half is about living as a disciple in full awareness of the earthly cost, knowing that whatever it is in a passing world, it is infinitely repaid in God's eternal kingdom.

Now we get to Mark 13, known as the Olivet Discourse. It is the longest single teaching in Mark. The temple has played a central theme as Jesus entered Jerusalem on his way to the cross. The spectacular temple was the center of religious life and the sacrificial system, of Jewish national identity, and of architectural pride for Herod the Great who built it. Starting with Ch. 11 **J**esus triumphantly enters the city and goes to the temple. The king has returned! **H**e tells a parable that predicts the end of the unbelieving religious leaders, and the end of the sacrificial system at the temple. **T**he religious leaders challenged his authority while he walked in the temple. **I**n Ch 12 all three of the Sanhedrin's religious bodies (Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes) tee up one after another to trap Jesus in his words while he is at the temple. **H**e reveals himself as both the son of David and the Son of God, the Lord, in the temple. **H**e commends the vital faith of a widow displayed in her sacrificial giving in the temple. Now we get to this final teaching regarding the temple in chapter 13.

Mark 13:1–13 — And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" ² And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

¹ Mark 1:15

² Mark 8:34–35

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³ And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?” ⁵ And Jesus began to say to them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷ And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

PRAY

Chapter 13 is a bridge between Jesus public ministry and his atoning death on the cross. Given that the back half of Mark it’s about becoming a disciple of Christ by denying yourself and everything the world has to offer, we would expect something focused on discipleship. Indeed, it is a remarkable teaching that carries the disciple not just through the day in, day out living of the faith, but all the way through persecution, and end times, and right into the presence of God. The chapter presents interpretive challenges that people far smarter than I can’t figure out with certainty. I’m not going to offer any novel ideas, but we are going to focus on the main things which are the plain things.

The Gospel Fulfilled — vv 1–2

Mark begins the teaching on the end times with Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple. Let’s look in **vv 1–2**. The temple itself was a prideful monument to Herod’s architectural genius. It was a beautiful building and engineering marvel. Though some of the foundation stones still in place today weigh over 1,000,000 pounds, yet 1st century engineers figured ways to build it. Including the courts, the area was perhaps equivalent in size to Sedgwick County Park. It’s easy to understand how one of the disciples would say, “Look at these wonderful stones and buildings!” There was an **Ooo** and **Ahh** factor to it. But Jesus immediately responds that the temple, the **Ooo** and **Ahh** factor of human pride, the corrupt religious leaders who profited by their marketeering in the courts, God is executing **final judgement** on all that. The sacrificial system of worship itself — all of it is coming to an end.

Sacrifices that only reminded of sin would no longer be needed because the Sin Bearer is ushering in the new covenant through his blood. The place where every priest stood daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins — Christ will offer for all time a single sacrifice for sins. By this single offering he will perfect for all time those who are being sanctified.³

³ Hebrews 11:12–14

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Death was once my great opponent, but no more: It was finished upon that cross. External, outward religion and righteousness are being ended. Where God was outside of me in the temple, that's gone, and he is moving inside, making my body the temple of the Holy Spirit. Rejoice in this! What a brilliant ray of sunlight bursting in on the difficulties that lie just ahead.

In foretelling God's judgment and the complete destruction of the temple — not one stone will be left on another — it reminds us that there is no human work that can resist the judgment of God: no magnificent engineering marvel, no magnificent meritorious work. There is no clever course we can plot that will leave us in our pride and safe from God. No, the day of the Lord is irresistible. What may be perceived as a beautiful life, but one lived apart from God in unbelief — in that Day, every imagined defense and argument will be pulled down with not one left on another. Oh! What a horrible judgment! Flea to the one who made the final sacrifice in order that you may live. Run to the one who took the destructive condemnation of God's wrath on himself lest you be destroyed as the temple.

When Does the Day of Judgement Come? — vv 3–8

They move from the temple across the way to the Mount of Olives where the core disciples ask him, "When will these things be?" Are these the end times? When are the last days? There are two epochs or periods in the Scripture: the former days and the last days. The dividing line between the two is the cross and resurrection. So we are living in the last days. We may be living in the last of the last days, and you can make a case for that from the Olivet Discourse. But we are not given a timeline with dates circled. Indeed, the Father alone knows that Final Day as we will see you in a couple of weeks. Here we are told to be on guard, or watch carefully. Human history will be brought to an end, but don't distract yourself with charts and charts and calculations. Don't worry so much about when things happen in future, but be on guard as they unfold and walk in obedience to God's word and his ways in the present.

Those who are paying careful attention at the head of the class may be hearing echoes from Mark 8. Jesus is calling them to costly discipleship, not calendar dates.

No, you don't need to worry about **when**, you do need to be prepared to deal with the **what**. The rebellious world that is laboring under a curse, and sinners who continue living in rebellion are going to spin down into more and more wickedness and godlessness. Now he gives two commands:

- **See that no one leads you astray — v 5.**

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- **Do not be alarmed or disturbed** — v 7.

See that no one leads you astray, because many false christs and teachers will come in my name. Note that the threat comes from inside sources. The threat is not that Rome will lead you, astray or pagans, but that people will creep in misrepresenting Christ and making false claims, and they will attempt to lead you astray. Gnostics are in Colossae. John is fighting gnostics. Several insurrectionists showed up in the first century claiming to be on mission from God to deliver Jews from Rome. Jesus said many will do similar things. But he is the only I AM, the only one who delivers the soul from Hell. That's the assignment of the Messiah, not a political kingdom. We already know that many people were looking for a political ruler. **Verse 6** makes perfect sense in this light as he tells us many will be led astray by these frauds.

How do we know the difference between the authentic Christ and the posers? Well, the obvious answer is the real Christ sitting in their midst. He has come once for all. They must know him, and be intimately acquainted with him and his word so not to be misled. It's no different for us. We must know what is true about God by his word so that we can follow the command not to be led astray. Does it surprise you that Jesus says many will be led astray. We might expect some — some careless individuals, or those who aren't serious. But it's many. And there is an interesting group dynamic. If so, many people are doing it, it must be right. A popular personality with crowd can become more popular still with even larger crowds. But that is not the standard of truth. Followers, rhetorical flourish, awards, impressive platforms, cool graphics, and fanboys are not the standard of truth. God, revealed in his word, is the standard of truth. See to it that no one lead you astray.

Do not be alarmed when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, **because** this must take place. Along with internal spiritual threats, there will be threats from national affairs, wars, and natural calamities. We seem to live under a perpetual threat of war as nations and kingdoms vie for who is going to run the place. King Jesus will ultimately end this attempt to usurp his authority. Until then, wars and rumors of wars. Do not be alarmed, because the world is in rebellion against the rule and reign of Christ. Until the Prince of Peace returns to establish his new creation, sinful men will go on moving from bad to worse. Don't be alarmed the creation groans under the curse of corruption and sin, as Romans eight tells us. Earthquakes happen. There are droughts and famines. So there are signs in international affairs, there are signs in creation. And this is not the end, but the beginning of birth pains. None of this escapes God's notice. His throne is not threatened nor destabilized. There is

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never a time he says I didn't see that coming. There is never a time he is not sovereignly governing all things. So do not be alarmed.

Let's draw a line here for this week and think about some things in closing. My guess is every one of us in here feels the upheaval and even danger of the world that we live in. The church of the Lord Jesus is under threat in the west, and in many places in the world. Some are even beginning to question whether Christianity will survive much longer. Let's be reminded of this truth from Psalm 2:

- ¹ Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?
- ² The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,
- ³ "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."
- ⁴ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.
- ⁵ Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,
- ⁶ "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill."

Nothing in all of God's creation threatens him. Nothing in all of his creation is outside of his control. We are told at the front end that difficulty and persecution come to those who follow Christ. It came to him, and those who follow him will be marked by the same things that marked his life and ministry.

The church at Colossae endured threats from gnostic teachers; the city itself was destroyed by an earthquake shortly after the church had started. What do we hear out of the church at Colossae? **[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.**

Roman rulers slaughtered 1st Century believers in unspeakable ways for entertainment. If we were to look around 65 AD without the benefit of knowing what we now know, then try to predict how long those early believers would be sustain any semblance of the Lord's church and keep the faith, we may be inclined to say, "they can't make it another three years." But it was in the midst of a difficult, groaning creation, a persecuting government, a depraved and decadent culture, and a spiritual onslaught of false teachers that the little persecuted church thrived and sent out missionaries. And so

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that we sit here today, aware of the gospel, and under the teaching and preaching of God's word because of their faithfulness.

It's hard not to make connections between where they were in the first century and where we are today, isn't it? Then let us hear and obey what they heard and obeyed: See that no one lead you astray. Do not be alarmed. Study God's word with a heart to know, and pursue God – not just read through some assignment. When you sit with the Bible open, you are sitting at the throne of the ruler of the universe. And he wants you to know him. He wants you to be prepared for this — so he gives us the scripture. With a heart warmed toward fully knowing him, make it your aim to know him and to please him.

As I visited with Elisabeth, a week ago, we discussed the concern for her generation. Even people who have an awareness that there is God are in great danger, because they do not know who he is. They are swept away by every godless and demonic thought that comes along. I asked, we spoke, I urged her, and she agreed that it was important, to study God's word with a sense of urgency so as not to be drug away by false christs who cannot save and tyrant kings who can kill the body but not the soul. God has equipped us to stand in such a day as this. We need not fear the ultimate outcome of our soul. Will there be increasing difficulties moving forward? Well, this sermon is a bit of a cliffhanger. Wait till you see what's coming next week. But in all this, as we read in 1 Peter for the Call to Worship, **According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.**

The ark of the Lord Jesus is sure. He has never lost a single soul the Father has entrusted to his hand. Rejoice and take courage.

PRAY