

Prepping for the Future

Mark 13

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As we have been working our way through the gospel of Mark, we've come up against some pretty difficult passages. Often those passages are difficult because of their startling clarity. There is not much doubt about what they mean, but they are hard teachings to put into practice.

This morning, we turn our attention to one of the most difficult passages in the gospel of Mark. What makes this passage difficult, however, is not its clarity, but rather that we are left wondering what exactly Jesus was talking about. There have been many debates about the right way to understand and interpret Jesus' words in these verses, and we will wrestle with some of those questions this morning. But while wrestling with what exactly Jesus was predicting would happen is fun, we must not allow it to distract us from the clear teaching of this passage, which is what Jesus tells His disciples (and by extension, us) to do in the light of these teachings. We'll try to keep this in mind as we walk through what is often referred to as Jesus' Olivet Discourse from Mark 13.

The Temple

The passage begins with Jesus and His disciples leaving Jerusalem. Over the last several weeks, we have looked at many of Jesus' encounters in the temple courts that happened at the beginning of the last week of His life. It was now probably evening on Tuesday or Wednesday, and Jesus and His disciples were leaving the city.

As Jesus was leaving the Temple that day, one of his disciples said, "Teacher, look at these magnificent buildings! Look at the impressive stones in the walls."
² Jesus replied, "Yes, look at these great buildings. But they will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left on top of another!" (Mark 13:1-2, NLT)

One of the disciples, for whatever reason, decided to comment on the magnificent structure that was the temple in Jerusalem. And whoever said this was right! The temple in first century Jerusalem was truly a spectacle to behold. The temple had been rebuilt in 516 BC after the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity. Later, Herod the Great decided to undertake a massive expansion of the temple, doubling its size. He built up the top of the mountain to accommodate this huge expansion. By the time Jesus was on the scene, the expansion project had been going on for over 40 years and was not yet finished! It would not be completed until AD 64.

The Jewish historian Josephus described the temple as being covered in gold plates, so that if you were to look at it at sunrise, you would be blinded by the reflection, as you would be if you were looking at the sun itself. Great, white marble pillars rose more than 40 feet into the sky, and shone brightly against the backdrop of everything around it. The foundation stones on which the temple expansion was carried out were massive. Many of the stones would have been about the same size as a railroad boxcar!

Needless to say, when this disciple commented on the majesty of the temple and the buildings that were part of the temple complex, he was correct.

The temple was important to the Jewish people because they viewed it as symbolic of the very presence of God and a sign of God's blessing on them. This is why what Jesus said next was such a big deal. He said the temple would be completely demolished, with not one stone left on top of another. Apparently, this silenced everyone, because the conversation didn't continue until later, when they stopped on the Mount of Olives.

The Big Question

When they sat down on the Mount of Olives, about a mile away, Jesus and the disciples would have been able to look back at Jerusalem and would have seen the temple standing magnificent above the city. Peter, James, John, and Andrew came to Jesus and asked for more details about what Jesus had said.

Tell us, when will all this happen? What sign will show us that these things are about to be fulfilled?" (Mark 13:4, NLT)

Jesus then launched into an explanation that is confusing and bewildering. Before we dig into these predictions, we need to review Jewish history. Jesus's ministry was probably carried out sometime around the year AD 30. Around the year AD 63, some Jewish zealots revolted against Rome and started a war with them. The Roman General, Titus (who would later become emperor) surrounded the city and laid siege to it, leaving the people inside to starve to death. Over one million people likely died in this siege and the conditions were terrible. In AD 70 the Romans entered the city and destroyed it, including burning the temple to the ground, destroying it completely. Since that time, the temple has never been rebuilt.

So, Jesus knew the destruction of the temple was imminent and would occur during the lives of (at least some of) these disciples. He also knew the conditions they would face leading up to these events.

This leads us to the central question about how to understand Jesus' statements about what is going to happen. There are basically three ways to understand them:

1. Jesus was describing the events that would happen around the time of the temple's destruction.
2. Jesus was describing the events that would happen prior to his return.
3. Jesus was speaking in some measure about both events.

The events described in verses 5-23 match up very well with the fall of Jerusalem, so that seems to be a natural way to understand those verses. Sometimes prophecies have a near fulfillment (that is, something that happens shortly thereafter) and also a far fulfillment (something that happens far in the future), so it is possible that these descriptions apply to both the destruction of the temple and Christ's return, though personally, I think Jesus is speaking primarily about the fall of Jerusalem here.

Here are some of the things Jesus said would precede those days.

There would be many false Messiahs. Any time trials come, inevitably there are also many people who will hold themselves up as the savior who can deliver the people from their fate. Jesus was cautioning the disciples not to be distracted by these pretenders.

There would be wars, earthquakes, and famines. All of these things happened in the succeeding years. Earthquakes and wars are constant, but there were several notable events in the area around the same time. A massive earthquake destroyed nearby Laodicea just a few years later. Pompeii was destroyed by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius as well. And there were great famines that came during this time.

The disciples would stand trial before both Jewish and Roman leaders. We know from the book of Acts that this did indeed happen. Many Christians were put on trial by both groups of leaders. We also know that these believers spoke boldly and clearly to these powerful rulers who held their lives in their hands.

Family would betray family, even to death. The early Church understood that when they became followers of Jesus their families might disown them, and they may even be at risk of being turned in to the authorities by their families. Sadly, this was the case for many Christians.

The appearance of the sacrilegious object that causes desecration in the temple should signal believers to flee from Jerusalem. This term comes from the book of Daniel. It was also used to describe Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who took over the temple in 168 BC and desecrated it by setting up altars to Zeus and slaughtering pigs inside. But Jesus seems to be using this term to describe a specific instance prior to the destruction of the temple. We know that the Jewish Zealots took over the temple and committed terrible atrocities there during that time, so it's possible that this is what Jesus was describing, but it could be something else entirely. It would make sense for Jesus to say that when those things happened, Christians should flee, before things got far worse (which they did, when Rome laid siege to the city). If Jesus was referring to the second coming, fleeing the city would do no good.

Why did Jesus tell them these things? I think there are a couple of reasons. **First, so they could be prepared.** Jesus was preparing the disciples in advance for some of the hardships they would face and was giving them marching orders—to continue clinging to Him, no matter what trials they might face.

Second, so they would know God was in control. It is tempting, when the world feels like it is falling down around us, to conclude that God must not be real, or that He is not really in control. The disciples would surely feel that way about the destruction of the temple. These events would shake their faith, but Jesus reminds them that none of these things would be a surprise to God, and they were not a sign that God has abandoned them. In fact, Jesus says the Lord would actually limit their scope, reminding them that God was still in control.

Third, God would be with them. Jesus' instructions were clear. They should continue to be faithful and to preach the truth no matter what. It is important to note that Jesus didn't promise to spare them from hardship, but He did promise that God would give them what they needed to speak the truth, even in the midst of hardship.

These lessons, though they were directed specifically to the disciples in the first century, remain applicable to us today. When we see things that cause us to question whether God is still in control, we can remember that nothing is a surprise to Him, and that He is still on the throne. Our task remains the same—be faithful and speak the truth, armed with the knowledge that God will help us to do that.

Christ's Return

The beginning part of this passage seems to be speaking about the events that would happen within the lifetimes of many of the disciples, the events leading to the destruction of the temple. But in verses 24-27, Jesus seems to shift His focus. In these verses, He seems to be speaking about the end of all things; what the Old Testament called the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Listen to what He says,

²⁴ "At that time, after the anguish of those days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will give no light, ²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ Then everyone will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send out his angels to gather his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven. (Mark 13:24-27, NLT)

The first part of this passage is a quotation from the book of Isaiah, describing the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Jesus then connects Himself with this event, saying that this is when He will return and will send His angels to gather believers from everywhere.

So, Jesus seems to be describing His second coming. What He describes is cataclysmic. The entirety of creation will be shaken by His coming, and it will be unmistakable. For believers, however, this day is wonderful, because we will be gathered together to spend eternity with Him.

Parables

Jesus concluded His teaching by sharing two parables, which were both designed to spur the disciples on toward faithfulness, no matter what lay ahead. I believe the two parables are speaking about the two different events Jesus has described—the first parable, about the fig tree, speaks about the events leading up to the destruction of the temple, and the second parable, about the master's return, speaks about Christ's return at the end of all things.

The reason for believing these two parables are speaking about two different things is somewhat obscured in the New Living Translation. But if you look at them in a more literal translation, there's an important difference in language.

In the ESV, the parable of the fig tree reads like this,

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. (Mark 13:28-31, ESV)

Jesus said that when they “see these things taking place”, they should recognize that His words are coming true. This seems to refer to the signs Jesus described in verses 5-23.

The statement this generation will not pass away until all these things take place has troubled many who assumed Jesus was talking about His second coming, because the disciples have died and Christ hasn’t returned. The word generation can also mean lineage, so Jesus could be saying that the Church will not pass away before He returns. But if Jesus was talking about the destruction of Jerusalem, this statement makes perfect sense, since these things did happen within a generation.

The reason I think these parables refer to different events, however, becomes clear when we look at the language Jesus used for the second parable.

³² “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. ³⁵ Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.” (Mark 13:32-37, ESV)

Jesus sets off this second parable differently. He begins the second parable by saying, “But concerning that day or that hour...” which seems clearly to refer to His second coming. The fact that Jesus uses very different language in these two parables seems to indicate that He’s summing up His predictions of two distinct events.

With that in mind, we should ask what Jesus’ instructions were. The parable of the fig tree instructs the disciples to stand firm, even though they are going to face hardship. They shouldn’t be surprised when these things happen, even though they will shake them to their core. It is a reminder that God is still on the throne. The things of this world are temporary, but God’s Word is forever. Many people will claim to have the answers, but Jesus says to trust God’s Word alone as their anchor.

The second parable takes a very different approach. There, Jesus says that no one will know what He is going to return. In the first parable, He told the disciples to watch for the signs these things would happen, in the second parable, He says there are no signs

to watch for. He simply says to be faithfully engaged in serving the Master, knowing He may return at any time.

This, I believe, is Jesus' primary lesson. Many people get bogged down trying to map out all the details of the end times, so they can anticipate Christ's return. I think that completely misses Jesus' point. Jesus' point seems to be that we *cannot* know when His return is going to happen, so we should live each day knowing that this could be the day He returns.

Here is how one commentator summed up Jesus' words in this section,

Beware of groups who claim special knowledge of the last days because no one knows when Christ will return (13:32). In fact, it's not important to know. Jesus tells us that the best way to prepare for the future is to stay faithful to him and away from imposters. We must not be sidetracked by promises for social, economic, military, or political reform. The only sure way for the disciples (and all believers) to keep from being deceived is to focus on Christ and his words.¹

Conclusion

Speculating about how the Lord will bring everything to a close is a popular pastime. Many people have built significant followings by claiming to have special insight into these things or by trying to explain how current events fit into their end times theology. But I think that misses the point and might even be detrimental to the faith. So, in closing, I want to reiterate the lessons Jesus was teaching in this passage.

First, difficult times should not lead to panic or a crisis of faith. God doesn't promise that things will go smoothly. Quite the opposite. When things get hard, we can begin to worry, or we can choose to trust and refocus on Him. Jesus reminds us that no matter what happens, God is in control. We should rest in that truth and remain faithful.

Second, we don't know when Jesus is coming back, so we should be prepared. We should live each day in the light of eternity. We should endeavor to serve the Lord such that, if He were to return at that moment (and we know He could!), we would be found to be faithfully doing the work He had entrusted to us. If we do this, we don't need to worry about trying to figure out when He will return—we'll be ready no matter what.

Third, our anchor should always be God's Word. Lots of people claim to have the answers we need. Jesus reminds us that our hope, our salvation, our direction comes from Him alone. The things of this world will change. Things we think are permanent will not be. But God's Word stands forever. That's where we should anchor our lives.

Jesus doesn't give us all the details of the future. He gives us marching orders. If we strive to be faithful to Him, anchor our lives to His Word, and live in the light of eternity, we will be ready for whatever the future may hold.

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¹ Barton, Bruce B. *Mark*. Life Application Bible Commentary. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994.