

Stay Awake and Ready for Christ's Appearing

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 13:24-37 / June 23, 2024

Introduction:

This morning, we will continue our time in Mark 13, covering the “Olivet Discourse,” found also in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. As we saw last Sunday, its interpretation is challenging and there many views surrounding when the events mentioned have or will take place. Has everything already taken place? Is all of it going to take place in the future? Or has part of it happened already with part yet to happen? As I have seen godly men like John MacArthur, J Vernon McGee, R.C. Sproul, Alistair Begg, and others all disagree on something within this discourse, I am convinced we should hold our views on these things loosely and not allow them to divide us. Family, I will say it again, we can all agree on the main truth. That Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. The details of end times are not primary doctrines of our faith and should not divide us. I will preach what I am persuaded this all means but I encourage you to keep studying on your own. As I shared last week, I am persuaded the Olivet Discourse is speaking of an initial expression of great tribulation during the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 that marks the beginning of a total period of tribulation between Christ's ascension and His second coming. In other words, Jesus speaks of events pertaining to what happened leading up to and culminating in the temple's destruction, while also pointing to aspects of tribulation believers will face until Christ returns visibly at the end of the age. I don't see these events as either fully about the past or the future, but having part that pertains to the past and part that speaks of the future. Last Sunday, we covered verses 1-23, which I am sure left you with questions, especially related to verses 24-27. Today, we will unpack verse 24-37. Before we get to our text, follow the flow of this chapter with me. In verse 4, Mark records two of three questions the disciples ask Jesus about the prophecies He's made. Matthew adds the third in Matthew 24:3. They ask “when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished? (Mark 13:4) ...and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? (Matthew 24:3)” In verse 5 Jesus begins to answer those questions. Notice how the chapter flows through indications of time until verse 28. Verse 7, “and when you hear...” Verse 9, “But be on guard...” Verse 11, “And when they bring you...” Verse 14, “But when you see...” Verse 19, “For in those days...” Verse 24, “But in those days...” Verse 28, “From the fig tree learn its lesson.” Verse 28 breaks the flow by introducing a new thought, which is a parable designed to bring everything to a conclusion. Then, Jesus gives another contrast in verse 32 separating this conclusion from what He declares in verses 32-37. This connects most, if not all, of verses 5-31 to the same events, leading to some believing this all happened in the past, and others it will all happen in the future. So, we find verses 24-37 are vital to understanding what Jesus is saying. Look now with me at verse 24, “But in those days, after that tribulation” Pause there. Jesus speaks to something “after that tribulation,” connecting to the tribulation spoken of in verses 19-21. In Matthew 24:29, Matthew records “Immediately after the tribulation of those days.” Many believe the rest of verses 24-27 have to be speaking of Christ's second coming and this shows the tribulation must be in the future, or maybe Christ is speaking of dual prophecies. Others say what happened in A.D. 70 was only the beginning of “that tribulation” and this is describing the tribulation of the entire church age. While both understandings are possible, I am not persuaded either is what Jesus means. Look at verses 28-32. Jesus says, “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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Jesus' uses a parable to draw what He has been saying to a conclusion. In verses 28-29, He says just like a fig tree in bloom shows summer is near, these things taking place show that he is near. Then he says all these things will take place before this generation passes away. Three questions should be asked. First, does the fig tree symbolize Israel?

The fig tree is often a metaphor for Israel in the Old Testament, and some suggest because Jesus used this metaphor in Mark 11, the fig tree refers to Israel as well here. However, look at Luke 21:29. There, Jesus says, "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees." So, the parable isn't only about the fig tree but all trees. Second, what are "these things taking place"? Is it everything from verses 1-27? It can't be if verses 24-27 refer to the Christ's second coming. Notice Jesus says "when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates" not "he is here." If "these things" include Christ's second coming, He would have already arrived. Further, notice the contrast Jesus makes in verse 32, "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Jesus contrasts "that day" with what the disciples will have seen taking place. "These things" help the disciples "know that he is near," but "no one knows" the day of His coming. Third, what does "this generation" refer to? This statement is significant because Jesus starts by saying "Truly, I say to you." Some say the term for generation can mean "clan, or race" and this is referring to the Jewish race. However, there is a more commonly used term for "race" and every other time generation is used in the gospels, except possibly once in Luke, it refers to the generation of that day. Notice how Mark uses this term in his gospel. Mark 8:12, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." Mark 8:38, "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." Mark 9:19, "And he answered them, 'O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you?'" Each time Mark means the generation Jesus is speaking to. Others say verse 30 should be translated "that generation," referring to the generation alive during a future tribulation when all these things take place. However, again there is a more preferred Greek word for "that," used in verses 24 and 32, and the phrase "this generation" doesn't mean a future generation anywhere else in the gospels. The most natural reading of verse 30 is that Jesus is saying "all these things" will take place within the generation of the apostles. This is the same reading of Matthew 23:36 we saw last week, which is almost identical language and clearly refers to the generation of scribes and Pharisees Jesus was speaking to. Notice one more thing, the connection of verses 23, 29 & 30. Jesus says, "I have told you all things" in 23, "these things" show he is near in 29, and "all these things" will happen in this generation in 30. All of this leads me to be persuaded "all these things" happening within "this generation" speaks of everything that happened within that generation, leading up to and culminating in the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. What do we do with verses 24-27 then? Look first at verses 24-25, "But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." We should first note this language is used consistently in the Old Testament. The closest parallel is Isaiah 13:10. Look at Isaiah 13:1, 6, and 9-10. In verse 1, Isaiah is speaking against Babylon and says in verses 6 and 9-10, "Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come!... Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light." Isaiah is speaking of the downfall of Babylon which took place in 539 B.C. as the day of the Lord. And he says on that day the sun will be dark and the moon will not give its light. This reveals we can say the day of the Lord has already happened to Babylon while saying it is still going to happen in the future. We see similar language in Ezekiel 32; Joel 2 & 3; and Amos 8 referring to downfalls of various nations, including Israel, Judah, and a universal judgment. As R.T. France says well, "In the original prophetic context, therefore, such 'cosmic' language conveys a powerful symbolism of political changes within world history, and is not naturally to be understood of a literal collapse of the universe at the end of the world" (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 533). In other words, this is figurative language used to refer to God's judgement of nations, ending their position of power and installing something new. I am persuaded Jesus is borrowing that language to say this is what the disciples would know is happening with the destruction of the temple.

Israel's house was being left to them desolate or forsaken, indicating a change of order in God's kingdom purposes, where all things are now found in and under Christ alone. Look at verses 26-27 now, "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." I see two possibilities of what Jesus means here. It could be continued figurative language to signify the establishment of Christ's dominion. The language of verse 26 is drawn from Daniel 7:13-14 that we heard read earlier. Look there with me, "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." Note a couple of things. First, the Son of Man is coming with the clouds of heaven, not to earth, but to be presented to the Ancient of Days. Second, it is there that He is given dominion and a kingdom. Jesus could be figuratively speaking of His ascension to the right hand of the Father that firmly establishes His kingship and kingdom in the heavenly places. Consider what Jesus says towards the end of Mark 14, just one chapter later. In verses 53-65, Jesus is before the Jerusalem council and people were testifying against Him using His prediction of the temple's destruction and building a new temple, not made with hands. When the high priest asks Jesus if He was the Christ, look at how He responds in Mark 14:62, "And Jesus said, 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.'" Notice Jesus doesn't say the high priest will see Him seated on an earthly throne, but at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven. We should also note how seeing, in Mark's gospel, consistently carries the concept of perceiving. Jesus could be speaking of the disciples perceiving His enthronement in the heavenly places after the temple's destruction. If this is correct, verse 27 would refer to Jesus sending angels or messengers to spread His kingdom to all peoples. This connects to ends of the earth language Jesus uses in Luke 13:29, "And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God." So, one possibility of verses 24-27 is it all being figurative language to show how two things will reveal to the disciples Christ's kingdom has been firmly established, the destruction of the temple and the ingathering of all peoples to be part of God's people. While this is a strong possibility, I am not fully convinced of this due to Matthew's language. Look at what Matthew records in Matthew 24:30-31, "Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." Note how he speaks of all the earth mourning and a loud trumpet call. These details are used often to speak of Christ's second coming, so it would appear that is what Jesus is referring to. Now, remember in verse 29, "these things taking place" show that "he is near" not here. If verses 24-25 happen immediately after that tribulation, "these things" in verses 29-30 refer to that tribulation, and verses 26-27 refer to Christ's second coming, then there appears to be a gap of time between verses 25 and 26. As Alistair Begg says, just like our cars side mirrors say "objects may be closer than they appear," in prophetic language events may be farther apart than they appear. The phrase "then" or "and then" could mean this is the next significant event that takes place, not this happens right after verses 24-25. So, Jesus could be referring to the removal of the temple in God's kingdom purposes in verses 24-25 as the final thing signifying he is at the very gates and then the next great event is His second coming. I am currently most persuaded of this option because it coincides best with what we see in verses 28-37. Look there with me, "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. 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."

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—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.” Three times, in verses 32, 33, and 35, Jesus speaks of no one knowing when he will come. Family, no one can predict the coming of Christ. If they claim to be able to, run from their teaching. Notice, Jesus also commands the disciples to be on guard again and stake away four times. In verse 34-35, Jesus then says His ascension is like a man going on a journey and putting his servants in charge until he returns at any moment. He consistently tells the apostles to be prepared for His return at any moment. Therefore, I am currently persuaded Jesus is saying the destruction of the temple shows Christ is at the very gates and we should be ready for His return at any moment. A return that will be visible and clear. A moment when He will gather all His elect to Himself and welcome them into glory with Him. What a day that will be. This brings us to the main point of this section,

Stay Awake and Ready for Christ's Appearing

I don't want you to miss this point because it is the most important thing to see. Church, make no mistake about it, the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple was God's judgment on a rebellious people. When you considered the tribulation of those days, do you tremble at the horrors? That judgment is a representation of God's final judgment to come at the return of Christ. That judgment shouts from the mountain tops, there is still time to repent. As we cover the final section of Mark's gospel, we are going to see another moment where the day of the Lord is alluded to. That moment is when Jesus is on the cross. Not only did He experience the tortures of crucifixion but, more significantly, He experienced the full weight of God's wrath for the sins of His people. See, there is warning of judgment in this passage but there is also a message of hope. Because, when Christ returns, we are told He will gather the elect from every nation, tribe and tongue to Himself. These are those who are washed by His blood. These are the ones who escape the final day of the Lord because Christ bore their sin and suffered God's wrath for it, so they could be forgiven and redeemed. If you haven't trusted in His death for your sin, secure your salvation today so you are ready when He returns. Trust that His death is sufficient to cover your sin. And if you have trusted in Christ, look at verse 37 again. This command is given to all. Stay awake and be ready for Christ's return at any moment. This means faithfully striving to live as a true disciple in all the ways we have seen through this gospel. It means completing the work He has called you to. Being on guard and remaining faithful. Loving the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. Loving your neighbor as yourself. Giving generously and sacrificially to His kingdom purposes, storing up treasure in heaven. Humbling yourself and serving others. Picking up your cross and follow Him, all for His glory. These things keep you awake and ready. These things lead your heart to long for His return.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, what is God calling you to believe, desire, or do today? In all the possible interpretations of this chapter, the main point doesn't change. Be on guard and stay awake. Remain faithful to Christ and be ready for His appearing. How can you grow in your pursuing this? Family don't get distracted by the details and miss the main point. Strive to live for Christ's glory and trust that He has died, He is risen, and He will come again. Then, let His Spirit lead you in all truth. As always, you are welcome to come down to kneel before Him and pray for His continued grace, or seek prayer from our prayer team worshipping on the front rows or bottom of the stairs in the back with lanyards on. You can also sit and reflect or stand and sing as you are led. However you are led to respond, seek His grace today. Would you pray with me as we respond?