

“Let the Reader Understand”

Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 13

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois – February 28, 2016

Mark 13:1-37 NIV

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

As Jesus was sitting on the 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?”

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. 3 Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

“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 housetop go down or enter the house to take anything out. Let no one in the field go back to get their 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.

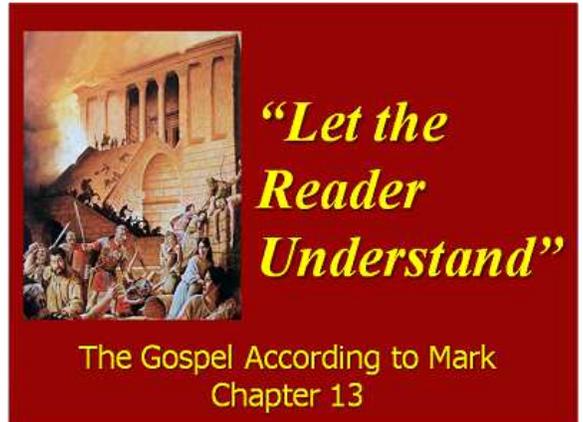
“At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.

“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.’

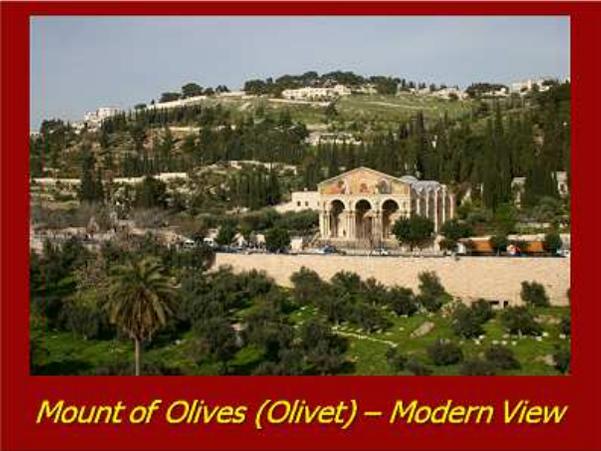
At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his [messengers] and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

“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. Truly I tell you, 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.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, 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 their 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!’”



In our trek through the Gospel According to Mark we now come to chapter 13, which records Jesus' conversation with his disciples about events to come. Scholars call this section the "Olivet Discourse," because most of the conversation takes place on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem on the other side of the Kidron Valley, opposite the Temple. Matthew includes the Olivet Discourse in what we call his chapter 24, with additional material not found in Mark's account. As we have seen, Mark, the shortest of the four Gospels, tends to abbreviate where the other Gospels often have a fuller account. Luke includes some of the material in his chapter 21, whereas John records other material from what we call "Holy Week" that isn't in the other three Gospels.



To understand all this we need to recall that the events of the week before Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection — and, indeed, all the events of Jesus' work in Galilee and Judea — weren't written down till much later. Instead, people who were the eyewitnesses to what Jesus did told and retold their stories so that many believers became familiar with them. But each eyewitness remembered, or emphasized, different things about the events in Jesus' life — which is why each of the Gospel writers, who depended on these eyewitness reports,

tells his story in a different way. And today we're happy to have all these different reports, because if all we had was one version we would assume the early Christian leaders got together and established a standard "party line" account of Jesus. If they had done that, some of the items different witnesses reported would undoubtedly be lost to us.

Among certain groups of Christians today there's an intense interest in what preachers call the "end times," things that are supposed to happen at some future date when everything God plans for this world comes to a head. Because parts of the New Testament, like Jesus' Olivet Discourse or the Book of Revelation, might appear to be prophesying future events, teachers will scour the Bible for these hints of things to come and put them together into a connected scenario. Visiting another church several months ago, I heard a detailed account of what's supposed to happen in the coming "end times." Our interest in "Bible prophecy" is only encouraged by what we see on the nightly news or read about on the Internet. World conditions are becoming so bad, many people feel, that God must be about to do something dramatic to wipe out the forces of evil and establish his rule of justice.

The Bible does present a vision for our future. For example, the prophet Habakkuk declares that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14). And our Bible ends with John the Revelator's vision of the city of God coming from heaven, and the Lord God and the Lamb dwelling with the people of God in a renewed earth where death and pain and injustice will be done away with. If we believe the Scriptures, this is where history is going. We all long for that day when God's purpose will be realized and, as the apostle Paul says in his Letter to the Romans, "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). We anticipate that day when our Savior, Messiah Jesus, appears and "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body," as Paul tells the Christians of Philippi (Philippians 3:21).

But I hope I don't disappoint you if I hold back from developing a detailed scenario of how all this is to come about, because I don't believe the Bible presents such a scenario. Well, then, Dr. Leonard, what about



the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13, where Jesus talks about things to come? I'm so glad you asked, because that's what we're talking about today.

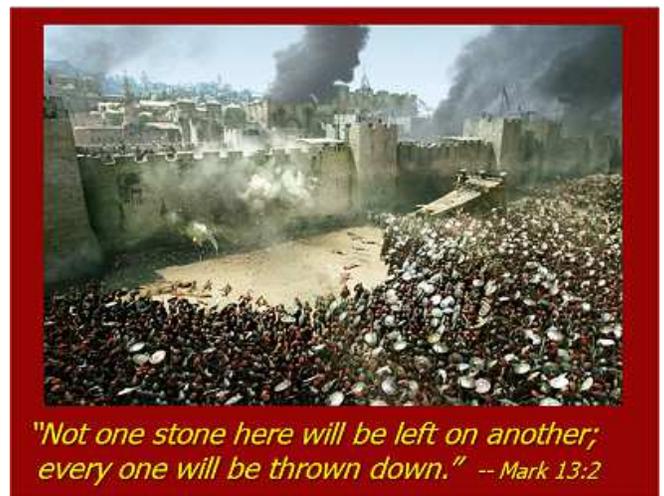
Let's notice, first of all, how Mark 13 begins and ends. It begins with the disciples remarking to Jesus about the huge stones that were going into the building of the Jerusalem Temple. The construction of the Temple was begun by King Herod the Great before the birth of Jesus; it was still going on when Jesus and his disciples visited Jerusalem some forty years later, and the work would continue for another three decades. So the disciples could not help but be impressed by this great project, one of the wonders of the Roman world. Jesus, however, isn't impressed because he knows that this building won't last very long. "It's all going to be torn down," he says. And when his disciples ask him, on the Mount of Olives, "When will this happen?" they're referring back to what Jesus has just said about the Temple, right then and there.



Now check out how Mark 13 ends. After describing things about to occur, Jesus cautions his disciples: "This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (Mark 13:30). People living right

then, he suggests — including some of his disciples — will still be around when the things he's talking about take place. And then he tells his disciples, themselves, to "keep watch," to stay on the alert and look for the beginning of the events he's describing. So the Olivet Discourse begins and ends with a reference to things that will happen during the lifetime of the people to whom Jesus is speaking. That suggests, to me at least, that for the most part Jesus isn't dealing here with things that are going to happen 2,000 years or more later. He's talking about events that, from our perspective, have already occurred in New Testament times, during the first century.

When interpreting the Bible, I think — and you might disagree with me, but this is what I think — a good rule to follow is to ask, How did the people who first heard the words of Jesus, or his apostles, or the Hebrew prophets — how did *they* understand what was being said; what did it mean to *them*? We can certainly apply biblical teaching to ourselves, and the world we live in today, and we must do so. But first we have to ask what the words of Scripture meant to those who authored or spoke them, under the inspiration of the Spirit, and what did their words mean to those to whom those words were first addressed. If we don't do that we're liable to miss the message, because the words of Scripture will just be filtered through our own cultural prejudices and presuppositions, and we'll misunderstand what God is saying. So, in the case of Mark 13, I would suggest that we have to hear Jesus' words through the ears of his disciples, first of all, and ask what they meant in their own environment. If Jesus is *really* talking about events in the far distant future, what he says wouldn't have applied to the people he was talking to. And that would certainly be "out of character" for Jesus, who doesn't mince words when speaking to the people he meets, but speaks directly to their situation.



Let's back up, then to the beginning of the Olivet discourse, occasioned by Jesus' prediction about the Temple, that "not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (13:2). Revolution has been fermenting in the Jewish community because of resentment at being governed by a foreign power. But during this period the Roman military machine is invincible, and Jesus knows there's no hope of defeating it militarily. He has already told them that those bent

on revolution need to rethink what they're doing; "Unless you repent," he warned them — repent of your misguided revolutionary fever — "you will perish" (Luke 13:5). The might of Caesar will eventually succumb to the advancing Christian faith, but not to any Jewish revolt. Indeed, in the year AD 70 the Roman armies, suppressing such a revolt, leveled the city of Jerusalem and destroyed Herod's beautiful Temple only a few short years after construction had ended. Jesus is talking about something that's going to take place in the relatively near future, because he sees what's happening in his Jewish community that has failed to respond to the message about the kingdom of God.

So Jesus warns his apostles about the things they will face in the coming days, those days after he has been raised and they will be carrying on his mission, preaching the gospel of the resurrection and the kingdom of God and bringing others into his church. They'll be hailed before courts — both Jewish and Roman — and be abused in synagogues. They'll be called to testify to Jesus and the resurrection before kings and high officials. At the same time, they'll be taking the message of the kingdom of God throughout the known world. And these are exactly the things we find the followers of Jesus doing when we read the Acts of the Apostles.

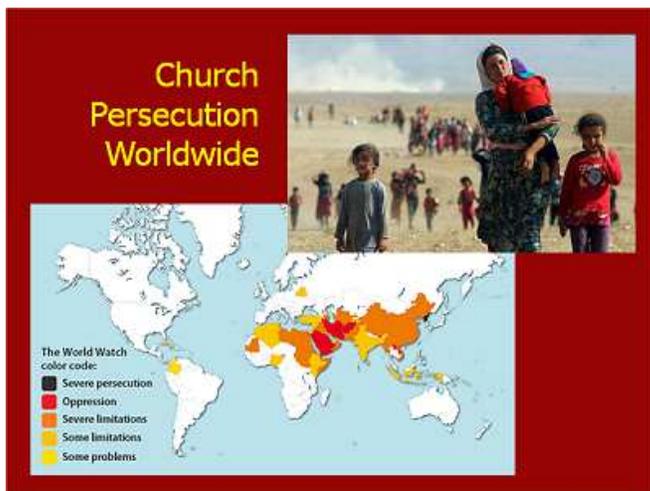
It won't be an easy time for Christian believers, Jesus tells them. Even close family members will turn them in to the authorities. If you're familiar with what goes on in Muslim communities today when someone converts to the Christian faith, you understand what Jesus' followers will be facing, because devout Jews in the ancient world were often just as adamant about rejecting a family member who, they believed, had deserted their faith.

Can we relate to this picture today? Some of our fellow believers are paying a high cost for their witness, both in our own nation and in other parts of the world. It's been estimated that more Christians died for their faith in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined, and the persecution continues. Christians have lived in the

Near East since New Testament times, but the spread of militant Islam has been wiping them out in Egypt, in Iraq, in Libya — driving them from their homes, driving them into exile, and in many cases executing them. China, North Korea, Indonesia, India and other nations have seen violent attacks against the followers of Jesus. In our own nation Christians who stand up for the clear teaching of Scripture have been taken to court, have lost their businesses, or have been hounded from the public square.

If we don't see these things so dramatically in our own community, consider what can happen in the family when friends and close relatives reject the values of our faith, and make it clear they have no place for God in their lives. They may not turn us in to the authorities, but by their words and their behavior they belittle our commitment to the work of God. I think we can relate to what the disciples were facing. With them, we need to receive Jesus' word of assurance: "Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:13).

Jesus describes some of the conditions that will mark the decades to come, after his death and resurrection. He mentions false Messiahs who will appear. "If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (13:21-22). Jesus was referring to what was almost a common occurrence during that time, for several figures did arise claiming to be Messiah. The last one was a man named Simon who, in the year 132, led a revolt against Rome. He took the title Simon

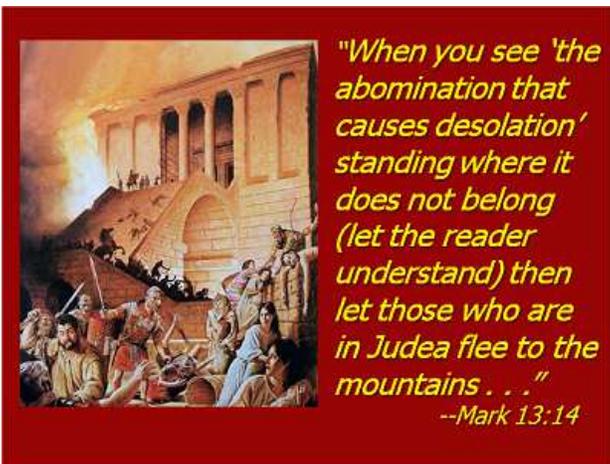


bar Kochba or "son of the star," a name with Messianic overtones, and he actually ruled in Judea for three years — even minting his own coins — until the Romans defeated him in the year 135. Simon bar Kochba forced Jews to join his revolt, and persecuted those who were Christians when they refused to join him, just as Jesus had instructed his disciples: "Do not believe it."

Describing what was about to take place — wars, earthquakes, famine, false Messiahs — Jesus told the disciples, "Such things must happen, but the end is still to come" (13:7). If we follow the real scenario the Bible lays out — which isn't a very detailed one — "the end" will not come till the rule of God, the righteous way of his kingdom, has spread across the earth. But, once again, in what Jesus tells his disciples, we can hear a word for our own age. Especially during a presidential election season, it's tempting to look for one leader who will come to power and make everything right. Those who seek office may promise to do all sorts of good things — good things, at least, as *they* see them — but we need to remember the words of Jesus: "Do not believe it." One human leader, whether this one or that one, can't bring in the kind of world God wants us to enjoy. The only way that happens is when God's people take seriously their mission: to live in the resurrection life of Jesus, God's new creation — the life of mercy, and forgiveness, and humility, and justice. That kind of life, which Jesus inaugurated in his teaching and, especially, when he was raised from the dead, is partly available now for all who join with him. It will be fully realized at the end of days — *but "the end is not yet."*

Jesus gives his apostles some specifics about what it will be like when his prediction of the Temple's destruction is fulfilled:

"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 housetop go down or enter the house to take anything out. Let no one in the field go back to get their 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 unequaled 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" (Mark 13:14-20).



Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, paints a sorry picture of what happened in the final years of the Jewish revolt against Rome, the revolt that ended with the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. When the Judeans protested the Roman taxes and attacked Roman citizens, the Roman armies plundered the Temple and executed 6,000 people. Perhaps, when Jesus mentions "the abomination that causes desolation," he is referring to the eagle symbol on the Roman standards, which had been the cause of previous protests by the Jews. It's a quotation from Daniel 9:27, and Mark inserts a parenthetical comment, "Let the reader understand," indicating that he doesn't want to be too explicit about what Jesus is saying because his Gospel may find its way to Rome. "Be on your

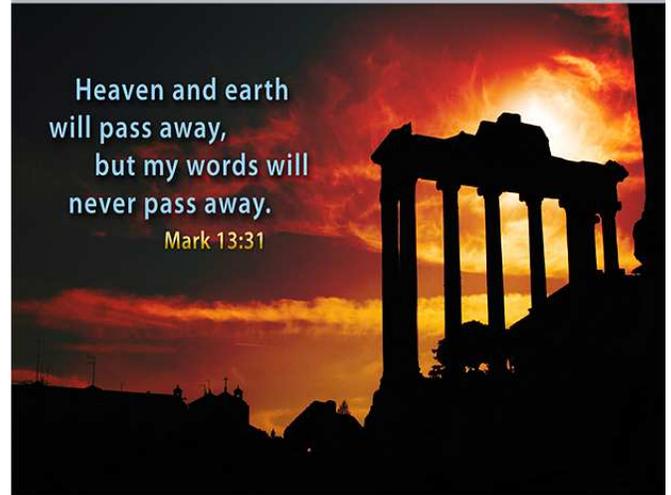
guard," Jesus tells his followers; "I have told you everything ahead of time." (13:32). In his Olivet Discourse, Jesus is warning his disciples to be on the alert for these things and to get out of Judea as quickly as possible when they start happening. History records that the Christians of Jerusalem did exactly that, and fled across the Jordan to the city of Pella.

We've tried to show how what Jesus tells his disciples in the Olivet Discourse related specifically to events that were about to occur in the first century. Still, it appears that Jesus is looking beyond those events to the time of his coming. These are his words:

"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 people 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" (Mark 13:24-27).

We should not be misled by his description of cosmic phenomena, strange happenings in the sun, moon, and stars. Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4. The Israelite prophets used the symbolism of disturbance in the heavenly bodies to represent earthly warfare and the downfall of world rulers. They weren't describing astronomical phenomena. And we know, for example, that stars are generally much larger than our planet and couldn't literally fall from the sky. But when God acts to fulfill his purposes, it will *seem like* everything has been turned upside down. And the Son of Man will come in glory to send his messengers out, and gather his people from all corners of the earth into his new creation. In reality, *that's what the church of Jesus is supposed to be* even today: the gathering of all whom the Lord has chosen to serve him and enjoy his presence. Once again, we don't have to wait for "the end" to see this begin to happen.

Our time is up, and we can't go into any more detail in our study of Mark 13. But we will break off with Jesus' words giving us both a warning and a promise. First the warning: "Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come" (13:33). Like the disciples, we need to be on the lookout at all times for the activity of the Lord to bring about his purpose, whether in dramatic ways or, more likely, in the less dramatic ways in which Christian believers interact with one another, and with others as well, to bring to reality the pattern of life that reflects God's new creation. And, second, the promise: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (13:31). In what we do to live for and serve the Lord Jesus, we always have the counsel of the Holy Scriptures, and the assurance that Jesus speaks to us through the Word of God.



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