

“The Gospel Must First Be Preached”

The Thirty-Eighth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 13:1-23; Ezekiel 7:14-23

Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and then went to the temple, where he forcibly cast the merchants from the court of the Gentiles. Almost immediately, Jesus was confronted by members of every religious office and sect within Judaism. The Herodians, Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders took turns confronting Jesus whenever he entered the temple precincts. Each time they did so, they found themselves thoroughly confounded by Jesus as he exposed their scheming for all to see. Jesus was fulfilling biblical prophecy and demonstrating that he was the Christ—making him a threat to the power and prestige of the Sanhedrin. He also exposed the self-righteousness of the religious leadership of Israel. Since Jesus was gaining popular support among the thousands of pilgrims in Jerusalem who were there to celebrate the Passover, the religious leaders of Israel decided to stop confronting Jesus in public. Instead, they hatch a plot to have Jesus arrested, tried, and then executed. Meanwhile, Jesus was preparing his disciples for what was soon to come—his death and resurrection.

We return to our series on the Gospel of Mark. We now come to Mark 13, in which we find the Olivet Discourse, so named because Jesus spoke these words while sitting upon the Mount of Olives, directly across the Kidron Valley from the Jerusalem Temple. This is an important and well-known section of the gospel, because it is here that Jesus instructs his disciples about what is yet to come after his death and resurrection. This is also one of the most hotly-debated passages in the Bible, since virtually all end-times views must claim their view is the view Jesus taught his disciples in this passage.

As Mark 13 unfolds, Jesus teaches his disciples about what to expect after he ascends into heaven. Of course, before his death and resurrection, the disciples have a great deal of trouble making sense of our Lord’s words. In fact, the questions they put to Jesus—which serves as the occasion for Jesus to teach them about the course of the future—demonstrate how little they understand about what Jesus is doing and saying. Understandably, the disciples are very confused and struggling to make sense of the difficult things which Jesus has been teaching them, especially in light of the surprising turn of events—the fierce opposition to Jesus by the Sanhedrin. Since the disciples had come to believe that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah, it was only natural for them to expect that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, he would be welcomed by all. Even though Jesus had on three occasions predicted his coming death and resurrection, the disciples were still thinking that Jesus’ messianic kingdom would dawn right then and there, and that Jesus would take his place on Israel’s throne in order to return the nation to its former greatness.

Because there is so much interest and speculation about the end-times in our own day and age, this is an important section of the gospel. In Mark 13, we get to sit at the feet of Jesus along with the disciples as we too hear for ourselves what Jesus had to say about the future. It should become clear that much of what American evangelicals believe about the end-times cannot be found in the teaching of Jesus. Jesus does not tell the disciples to expect the Rapture, nor does he teach that there will be a golden age upon the earth (a millennial age), either before or after his return (as in “pre” or “post” millennialism). Instead, Jesus speaks directly to the disciples about those events which will affect them, and which will set the stage for the fulfillment of all that Jesus has been teaching.

In response to two questions put to him by the disciples, Jesus now warns them about what will happen

when the covenant curses finally come down upon Israel, when the magnificent temple is destroyed, Jerusalem is sacked by the Romans, and the Jews dispersed into the four corners of the earth—all as a result of the events of 70 A.D. Like an Old Testament prophet, Jesus answers the disciples' questions and mixes together images of an immediate event (the destruction of the temple in A. D. 70), with an event about which the disciples could not begin to understand, his second advent. This is called prophetic perspective or “double fulfillment.” While we read this passage through the lens of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension, remember that in the disciples' minds, the talk of a second advent would make no sense whatsoever, since Jesus was presently with them when he speaks these words.

Therefore, the historical context must be kept in mind whenever we work our way through this discourse. Jesus was answering specific questions put to him by his disciples—although his answers to them, do tell us a great about the future course of human history.

It was when Jesus and his disciples were leaving the temple on Wednesday of Holy Week, after Jesus noticed the elderly widow putting all she had in the temple treasury, that the discourse unfolds. As Mark informs us in verse 1, “*As [Jesus] was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”*” There can be no doubt that the Jerusalem Temple was one of most magnificent buildings in the entirety of the ancient world. The disciples are in awe of the temple and everything it symbolized for first-century Jews. Mark tells us that they specifically remarked about the temple's grandeur and the size of the stones with which the temple was built. According to the famed Jewish historian Josephus, “the temple was built of hard white stones, each of which was about 25 cubits in length, 8 in height, and 12 in width.” A cubit was the length of a forearm, so we can estimate that the stones were some 40 feet long, 15 feet high and 20 feet wide. All of these were put in place without aid of cranes or hydraulics. These huge stones moved with wooden rollers and block and tackle—an amazing engineering feat.

Elsewhere, Josephus describes these stones as “ornate,” indicating that these stones were probably marbleized granite. The temple and its complex composed about 1/6th of the total area of old Jerusalem. No wonder that the site of the temple was regarded as an architectural wonder, even by the Romans, whose headquarters—the Praetorium or Antonia Fortress—were built just outside the temple complex. One writer called the temple “a mountain white marble decorated with gold.”¹ It must have been an awesome site, especially at certain times of the day, when sunlight reflected off the gold ornamentation.

Not only was the temple itself an architectural wonder, this building was the heart and soul of Israel. It represented Israel's covenant with YHWH. This is where the sacrifices for sin were made and accepted, since this building stood on the very site where Abraham offered to sacrifice his son Isaac. But this magnificent building, which had been rebuilt by Herod over the last forty years, also tied the current people of Israel back to the time of David and Solomon. The temple was the religious center of Israel, as well as the capital of the nation, that one place where Israel's entire history and identity was centered.

It would have been inconceivable to any Jew living at the time that this temple would (or even could) be destroyed. This is where God forgave sins. This building was the sign of God's blessing upon his covenant people. To speak of the destruction of the temple, would be like speaking of the destruction of the White House, Capital Building and the Lincoln Memorial to an American. To the Jewish mind, if the temple were destroyed, it must mean that the end of the nation and the end of the age were at hand.

¹ See the discussion of this in; Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 451.

And so while it was natural for the disciples to comment about the grandeur of the temple, Jesus' response to them, recorded in verse 2, was anything but expected. "*Do you see all these great buildings?*" replied Jesus. *Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.*"² Jesus uses double negatives here to make the point that the temple's destruction will be complete and total. Not one of the giant stones will be left standing upon another.² In many ways, Jesus words about the destruction of the temple are a further commentary upon the fact that the temple had become a den of thieves. The temple was not fulfilling its true purpose, part of which was serving as a house of prayer for the Gentiles. Despite the temple's theological and historical significance, ironically, the temple had now become a stumbling block to Israel.

Not only did the Jews of Jesus' day think that God could not get by without it, but the presence of the temple in Jerusalem was seen as the guarantee of God's favor. But the sad reality was that the people of Israel had long since lost sight of the object of faith—not the temple itself, but that to which the temple pointed—YHWH and his throne in heaven.³ Jesus certainly believed that the temple had become a stumbling block. According to Matthew's Gospel (12:6), Jesus had already declared, "*I tell you that one greater than the temple is here.*" The temple, and its sacrifices, was intended to point the people of Israel to the coming Messiah and his redemptive work. But once Jesus had come and proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand, the temple was even then being rendered obsolete because the true temple had come in his very person.⁴ Ironically, the temple now stood in the way of Israel embracing Jesus as the Messiah. Once Jesus had come, the temple was obsolete. It had served its purpose.

In verse 3, the scene shifts to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus and the disciples continue the conversation begun when they were leaving the temple a bit earlier.

The discourse unfolds in light of the earlier conversation. As we read in verses 3-4, "*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?'*" The Mount of Olives has a bit of prophetic signification in its own right. It was from this same vantage point that Ezekiel had witnessed the Shekinah glory leave the temple, leaving it defenseless (9:3; 10:18 ff; 11:23). Zechariah speaks of the Mount of Olives as the scene of a great eschatological battle (Zechariah 14:1-15). This may have been in the disciples' minds when they ask Jesus these questions. But more importantly, from the Mount of Olives one can look across the Kidron Valley down upon the temple complex, making the Mount of Olives, the ideal place to discuss the future of the city and its temple.⁵

The disciples ask two very specific questions of Jesus. The first question is, "when will these things happen?"—which is a reference to Jesus' comment that the temple would be destroyed and that not one stone would be left standing upon another. The second question is closely related, "what is the sign which will indicate when these things will come to pass?" These two questions seem to indicate that the disciples mistakenly believe that if the temple is to be destroyed (however inconceivable that may be),

² Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 451-452.

³ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 392.

⁴ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 392.

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 454.

this must in some way be tied to the end of the age. In other words, the disciples were thinking like preterists (who believe that the events of A.D. 70 fulfill the entirety of what Jesus predicts in the discourse). Jesus will correct this mistaken notion in his answer.

Jesus answers the second question first by speaking of two distinct future events—the destruction of the temple in A. D. 70 along the signs which precede it, before introducing the idea of a second advent at the end of the age after an indeterminate period of time elapses. This explains how Jesus can speak both of specific signs (which are fulfilled in the life-times of the disciples, although some of these carry on into the present age) while giving a specific command to watch and wait for his second coming as though it would not come for a long period of time. This feature of the Olivet Discourse has long troubled interpreters. On the one hand, how could Jesus speak of signs which precede his coming and state that this generation would not pass until everything was fulfilled (Matthew 24:34)? On the other, how could Jesus turn right around and speak as though his coming were far off in the distant future? The answer is simple. There are events in the immediate future—signs which precede the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. And there are signs (and a warning to watch and wait for the Lord) which precede his second coming at the end of the age. Jesus is speaking of two events—one imminent, one off in the distant future.

In verses 5-8, Jesus speaks directly to the second question asked by the disciples—what are the signs that precede the destruction of the temple? *“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.’”* Here, Jesus predicts a number of things which not only come to pass in the lifetimes of the twelve, but which also extend on into the present age. These are signs we will experience as well. The presence of natural disasters and wars do not mean that God is not in control of his world and his creatures. Rather, the signs of a fallen world are the guarantee of the final outcome—the return of Jesus to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new.

Therefore, there is a sense in which the signs mentioned by Jesus will characterize the entire period of time between Jesus’ first coming and his second—however long that may be. Notice that Jesus does not predict any specific earthquake or any specific natural disaster. Jesus does say that these things will occur both in the present (“[you] watch out”) and on into the future (the “beginning of birth pains”). The same is true for wars and political intrigue. Jesus doesn’t speak of a specific false teacher, but he does say that a series of false teachers and false Christs will come until the time of the end. This, by the way, is exactly what John teaches about the spirit of Antichrist in his first epistle (1 John 2:18; 4:3). The series of antichrists, John says, will plague the church until Christ comes again, even as they were plaguing the churches to whom John was writing in the first century. In the Olivet Discourse, when Jesus speaks of these false teachers, wars, and natural disasters as a “birth pains,” this means wars, earthquakes, and false teachers will come and go, become worse over time, alternating with periods of peace, just like the process of giving birth. This will go on until the Lord returns at the end of the age.

It is vital to notice the shift which takes place in verse 9-13 to the specific situation of the twelve—things they will face before the temple is destroyed. Says Jesus, *“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.”

When Jesus tells the disciples to “be on their guard,” we are given the interpretive clue that Jesus is now warning the twelve in quite specific terms of what will happen to them after his own death, resurrection and ascension. In effect, these are the marching orders given by Jesus to the twelve. When Jesus ascends into heaven, the disciples will immediately face arrest and imprisonment. In fact, they will be arrested and taken before the Jewish religious authorities. There is ample evidence of this being fulfilled in the Book of Acts and in the testimony of Josephus, who reports that James (the leader of the Jerusalem church and the author of the epistle which bears his name), was arrested and executed in 62 A.D. Because of Jesus, the disciples will stand before governing authorities, specifically to bear witness to them about the gospel. But, says Jesus, the gospel must first be preached to all nations, *before* the end will come. The way the sentence is structured, Jesus says that the end will not come before this condition—the gospel first being preached to all nations—is met.⁶ Certainly, this gives great weight to the missionary enterprise, and reminds us that the gospel being preached to the nations is a condition of Christ’s second coming—a serious blow to those who say that Jesus returned in judgment in A.D. 70, and that this was the end of the age.

Notice too, that Jesus also comforts the disciples with the news that they will not be left on their own once he leaves them. The Holy Spirit will be with them whenever they face arrest and persecution. The Spirit of God will give them the words to say when they stand before their accusers. The Spirit will enable them to bear witness concerning Jesus and his saving work. He will give them both the words to speak and the boldness to declare them. But the message they preach will also bring division. The gospel will divide families and lead to betrayal from close associates—words which certainly speak to the reality of someone becoming a Christian in a Jewish or pagan home. This kind of persecution of Christians will play out in both the Book of Acts, and in the Book of Revelation as well. Jesus pulls no punches. He tells the disciples plainly that all men will hate them because of their trust in him. Furthermore, they must stand firm to the end if they are to be saved. In effect, Jesus is telling them, there is no turning back, as will be evident in just two days when Judas betrays Jesus, while the rest go into hiding at Jesus’ death, only to be energized to preach the gospel by Christ’s resurrection and the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. All these things will come to pass, just as Jesus has foretold.

In verses 14-23, Jesus’ prediction takes on such specificity that critics of the Bible have to argue that these words were written after A.D. 70. Jesus now predicts the destruction of the temple, as he now answers the first question put to him by his disciples.

In verse 14, Jesus moves from generalities (signs which precede the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, and his coming at the end of the age) to specifics—“when is the temple going to be destroyed?” Says Jesus, “*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.*” Every Jew in Jesus’ age knew what this meant. The abomination which causes desolation is a reference to the prophecy in Daniel 12:11, in which something horrible would cause the defilement of the temple. That which was holy would become profane as a result.⁷ Most Jews believed that this prophecy had already been fulfilled in 168 B.C. when a Greek ruler—Antiochus Epiphanes—set up a pagan altar in the Jerusalem temple.

⁶ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 399.

⁷ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 402.

But now Jesus is saying this prophecy will be fulfilled yet again a second time. The specifics of the prophecy are clear to a Jew living in Jerusalem. Jesus is saying “when you see another event like that which took place in 168 B.C., you’ll know that the temple is about to be destroyed and that it is time to head for the hills to escape.” That is exactly what happened in A.D. 70 when Roman forces under Titus captured the temple from zealots during the Jewish revolt. An accidental fire led to the Romans destroying the temple, stone by stone, in order to remove the large amount of gold which melted and went down into the temple’s drainage system. The money from the Roman plunder helped pay for the construction of the Coliseum in Rome, and many Jews captured during this time, were forced to serve as slave laborers in the Coliseum’s construction. This event is immortalized on Titus’ Arch in the city of Rome, where this is graphically depicted in relief. Not one stone was left standing upon another.

Since those who remembered Jesus’ words will know what to look for, when they see the city surrounded by the Roman army (cf. Luke 19:43) and the temple fall under control of pagans, they are to immediately flee to the mountains. This flight into the wilderness for safety has a long history in Israel. This was the point of Ezekiel 7:14-23, our Old Testament lesson. Ezekiel predicted that the temple would be profaned, and the people of God are to flee for safety. Jesus gives a similar warning to flee to the wilderness in verse 14, which has loud echoes from passages like Ezekiel 7. But Jesus goes on to speak of the urgency of this call to flee in verses 15-18. *“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”* Jesus’ point is very simple. When you see the abomination, immediately run to the hills, and pray that this won’t happen at a time or under circumstances which will make travel difficult.

In fact, says Jesus, this impending disaster will be the time of Jerusalem’s greatest trial, *“because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again.”* Not only will Jerusalem face greater terror than at any time in its history (even when sacked before by the Babylonians and Antiochus), this will be the greatest tragedy in redemptive history, when the Old Covenant people of God, come under the covenant curse because they rejected their Messiah. But God will not forget his faithful remnant. Jesus promises the disciples that *“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.”* We know from a number of Christian sources (including the famed church historian Eusebius) that Christians heeded Jesus’ words, and many escaped to the city of Pella during what Josephus called the Jewish War, fought from A.D. 66-70. This horrible conflict ended with the destruction of the temple, the sack of the city, and the diaspora of the Jews into the ends of the earth. It was an unspeakable tragedy—the worst event ever to befall the covenant people of God.

Jesus warns that such horrible military, political and economic upheaval, not surprisingly, will lead to theological chaos. Jesus warns the twelve, *“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.”* Things are soon to go from bad to worse. The disciples must be on their guard for what is about to happen.

In verse, 24, Jesus goes on to speak of the second event, his return to earth on the day of judgment. This will be the time of the end, when history as we know it, gives way to a new heaven and earth. Lord willing, we’ll turn to this part of the Olivet Discourse in our next sermon.

There are a number of things to take with us from this very important passage.

First, Jesus speaks of a number of signs which precede the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. Some of these are quite specific and directed to the disciples. These include their arrest and trial before rulers and authorities. Jesus also tells them that Holy Spirit will give them the words to say so that they can bear witness of him. But Jesus warns them that the gospel they preach will divide families—many of us here have witnessed this very thing. When the kingdom of God comes in power, the hour of decision has come. When God calls we must respond in faith. Furthermore, all of Jesus' disciples must also persevere until the end to be saved. Elsewhere the Bible tells us that we persevere in faith until the end because Christ is in heaven right now as our advocate, ensuring that we continue to believe the gospel (1 John 1:5-2:2). In fact, one way we know who the elect are, is that they persevere in faith until the end.

Second, notice too that Jesus himself says that the gospel must be preached to all nations—this is both a sign and condition of the end. This, of course, is the basis for the church's missionary efforts to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. This means that Jesus is not a postmillennialist. He does not say that the entire world will be converted, nor that the gospel will be believed and embraced by all nations.⁸ He says it must be preached both as a means of conversion and a testimony against those who do not believe. And so instead of doing what so many do—spend all our time speculating about the end and what specific signs will tell us when that will be—instead, Jesus tells us to go and preach the gospel.

Third, Jesus does not predict specific wars, earthquakes and natural disasters. He does tell us that these are birth pains of the new creation. In fact, the signs ensure the birth—namely Christ's second coming. Therefore, we have every right to question those who make specific end-times predictions and tell us that a particular war or a particular earthquake is *the* sign of the end. Rather, these things tell us not *when*, but *that* Jesus is coming back to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new.

Finally, Jesus tells us that false teachers and false Christs will arise (some from within our own midst). They will deceive many. Jesus warns us to be on our guard against them. So, we should not be surprised when seemingly orthodox believers go off the rails and fall for these false teachers. We should expect it. As the Bible everywhere teaches, our weapon against these false teachers is the truth—the doctrine taught us by Jesus and his apostles. “New and improved” might be a great way to sell toothpaste and other products, but there can be no “new and improved” doctrine. In fact, when someone claims a new insight into Scripture, they must be regarded as suspect until a consensus is reached by the church as to whether not this “new and improved” doctrine is actually that taught in God's word.

The words of Jesus about the future are very clear and direct. There is nothing here which would lead us into speculation or fear. Jesus has warned us what to expect—the signs of the end. He has told us what to do in his absence—the gospel must first be preached. And we can be sure that he will return exactly as he promised, because he fulfilled so many Old Testament prophecies and because Jesus so accurately predicted the fall of Jerusalem and the events associated with A. D. 70. Never forget that the one who spoke of the future, holds that future in the very palm of his hand. He will bring all his purposes to pass and one day, he will return to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. Perhaps, he will come again before the end of this day. But if not, don't lose heart. He will come again. He has promised. And his promises cannot fail. Amen.

⁸ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 399.