

“Watch!”

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

Texts: Mark 13:24-37; Joel 2:28-3:16

As Jesus and his disciples sat on the Mount of Olives, directly across the Kidron Valley from the Jerusalem Temple, Jesus began to answer those questions put to him by his disciples regarding a statement Jesus made a short time earlier. As they were leaving the temple complex—probably late on Wednesday afternoon of Holy Week—the disciples remarked about the grandeur of the temple and the huge stones which were used in its construction. Upon hearing their comments, Jesus told them, “*Do you see all these great buildings? . . . Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.*” This shocking comment from Jesus, in turn, prompted the disciples to ask Jesus privately, “*Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?*” As we saw last time, Jesus answered their questions, taking their second question first. In doing so, Jesus set forth those signs which would precede the destruction of the temple. This section of the gospel has come to be known as the Olivet Discourse. These words constitute our Lord’s most significant teaching about the future course of history. In this passage, Jesus sets out those things his people should expect until he returns at the end of the age.

We return to our series on the Gospel of Mark and we are now in Mark chapter 13. Having completed the first part of the Olivet Discourse (verses 1-23), we now move into the second portion of the discourse, which deals with Jesus’ return at the end of the age to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. No doubt, the Olivet Discourse is a very important section of this gospel, because in it, Jesus explains to the disciples what is soon to come to pass in the events of A.D. 70, when the Roman army, led by Titus, destroyed the temple and the city of Jerusalem, thereby scattering the Jews into the ends of the earth as a tragic consequence. While explaining the signs that precede these momentous events—in effect, answering the second question put to him by the disciples first—Jesus goes on in the last half of the discourse to speak of a new event, his own second coming at the end of the age.

As we have seen, understanding the context in which Jesus gives this discourse is essential, *if* we are to interpret Jesus’ words correctly. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday four days earlier, he was cheered by the crowds who had come to city to celebrate the annual Passover. But Jesus was also confronted by virtually the entire Jewish establishment (the Sanhedrin), who regarded Jesus as a threat to their own power and prestige. Sadly, the shepherds of God’s people regarded their own Messiah as a danger to Israel—a tragic state of affairs since Jesus had come to save his people from their sins. Because of their rejection of Jesus and the kingdom of God, the nation of Israel had moved to the brink of disaster. And Jesus had predicted all of this in exacting detail.

When Jesus repeatedly confounded the various representatives of the Sanhedrin who tried to trip him up in public—which had the effect of increasing his support among the people—it was not long before the Sanhedrin ceased trying to confront Jesus openly. Instead, the Sanhedrin began plotting in secret to have Jesus arrested and then put to death. Knowing that he would be betrayed, arrested, beaten, and crucified, Jesus used these final hours to prepare his disciples for what was soon to come. His words therefore have a poignancy and urgency which makes this discourse so compelling.

Because they mistakenly expected that Jesus’ messianic kingdom would dawn right then and there, Jesus must now instruct the twelve about what to expect after his impending death, resurrection, and ascension.

While the disciples are struggling to make sense of all that was transpiring, Jesus knows he has only hours to complete their training and prepare them for the amazing turn of events soon to come. Therefore, when the disciples comment about the grandeur of the temple, Jesus uses the occasion to instruct them about the grim reality that hangs like a black cloud over the entire city, the temple, and the Jewish people. That reality is the dispensing of the covenant curses of which Jesus has been speaking and which are soon to fall upon Israel. The temple will be destroyed, the city will be sacked, and the Jews dispersed into the four corners of the earth. The unthinkable is about to happen. And yet through these horrific events, Jesus will save his people from their sins.

To the disciples, such a prediction of the destruction of the temple must mean that the end of the age is at hand, prompting the two questions found in Mark 13:4. *“Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”* In verses 5-8, Jesus speaks of signs which not only precede the destruction of the temple, but which also characterize the entire period of time between his first and second coming. These signs include the presence of false Christs, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, as well as political and economic upheaval. Jesus calls these signs “birth pains” of the end. When seen through the eyes of faith, these signs are in reality the birth pains of the new creation which dawns with our Lord’s resurrection and which reaches fruition on the last day when God recreates and renews all creation. On that day, every hint and trace of sin will be purged from the created order. So, while these signs begin in the lifetime of the disciples, they will characterize the entire period of time between Christ’s first and second coming.

In verses 9-12, Jesus moves on to warn the disciples about a number of specific things which will happen to them in the days after his resurrection and ascension. The disciples will be arrested by Jewish authorities because of their association with Jesus. They will be brought to trial before governors and kings, for the express purpose of bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the kingdom comes in power, family members will turn upon their own who embrace Jesus through faith. The disciples will be hated by all men because of their allegiance to Jesus and because they preach his gospel. But God will not leave them on their own. Not only will the Holy Spirit give them the words to say when they bear witness of Christ, but the Spirit will ensure that God’s elect stand will firm to the end and be saved.

In this section of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus is, in effect, giving his disciples their marching orders. The gospel must first be preached to all the nations so that the end might come. They must bear witness of Jesus, not only so that the elect might come to faith, but also as a witness against all those who reject the gospel. There are very difficult days ahead. And yet, in the midst of the troubles, the disciples will know a joy beyond measure. Jesus may be leaving them, but he will send them the blessed Holy Spirit.

Then, in verses 14-23, Jesus speaks of the thing that must have shocked the disciples the most—the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. He warns them—as well as those who will form the Jerusalem church—that when they see the abomination of desolation standing in the temple where it does not belong, immediately they are to flee into the wilderness for safety. Not only did the Jews of Jesus’ day know exactly what Jesus meant by the phrase “abomination of desolation,” (a reference to the events of 168 B.C. when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple), but the language of fleeing to the wilderness for safety is found throughout the Old Testament. The reference was clear and easily understood.

Jesus’ point is that when the disciples see something similar to that which happened when Antiochus desecrated the temple, they are to run for the hills. In fact, things will come about so quickly there will be no time to prepare. The disciples are to pray that these terrible events do not happen when it is tough to travel or when conditions are unfavorable. Says Jesus, this will be the worst event ever to befall the

city of Jerusalem and God's covenant people. Jerusalem and the Jews will come under the covenant curses—an unspeakable tragedy—and if God did not shorten those days, no one would survive.

In verses 5-23, Jesus has just predicted in exacting detail the events of 70 A. D. But like an Old Testament prophet who predicts both an event in the immediate future and another off in the distant future in the same prophecy, without skipping a beat, Jesus goes on to speak events at the end of the age.

This brings us to verses 24-37—the second half of the Olivet Discourse—in which Jesus introduces a new theme into the discussion, his second advent and the end of the age.

Recall that after warning his disciples about the chaos to come in the days of A. D. 70., in verse 22, Jesus gave his disciples the following directive: “*So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.*” In verses 24 and following, Jesus goes on to assure his people that final salvation and redemption will come when his messianic kingdom is consummated at the end of the age. Although the disciples expected this to occur shortly after Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus now tells them that they were right to expect such a consummation, but wrong as to when it would occur. Jesus tells them that this will not come until the end of the age. There is both an immediate fulfillment of his words (A.D. 70), as well as another fulfillment off in the distant future (the second coming). This is the tension known as the “already” and the “not-yet” and it permeates the entire New Testament, including the Olivet Discourse. In fact, it is the failure to acknowledge this tension between the already and the not-yet which lies at the heart of most erroneous views of biblical prophecy popular today.

Notice that in verses 24-25, there is an obvious change in subjects from what has gone before. Says Jesus, “*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.*” Although the NIV correctly emphasizes Jesus' use of the word *alla* (“but”), it is important not to miss the fact that this conjunction is used to introduce a sharp contrast with what has gone before.¹ This means that Jesus is speaking of the two phases of the course of history. The first phase is immediate and has to do with the destruction of the temple and those circumstances which will come to pass in the lives of the disciples. These things of which Jesus had just been speaking must come to pass—and will come to pass in A. D. 70. But Jesus now emphasizes that this immediate fulfillment is not the end of the age. Just as a number of Old Testament prophets have done, Jesus foretells of an immediate event and then suddenly introduces another event which will come to pass off in the distant future. Not only does the conjunction *alla* (but) indicate as much, but so do the signs which Jesus now enumerates.

Whereas in verses 5-23, Jesus had been speaking of concrete historic events—wars, earthquakes, famines, false-teachers, arrest, betrayal, and persecutions, now Jesus changes focus and speaks of cosmic signs which depict the complete disruption of the natural order. When the event to which he now refers comes to pass, the very cosmos itself will be turned on its head. The sun, moon, and stars will no longer give their light. The heavenly bodies will be shaken. No one will miss it! Therefore, this is no mere local judgment upon Jerusalem and the temple as preterists insist. Instead, this is a reference to the Day of the Lord in which YHWH gathers his people at the end of the age, and at the same time brings all things to

¹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 473 (fn. 87). Cf. Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: MacMillan, 1927) sec. 211.

their appointed end.² This is the very thing predicted in a passage such as Joel 2:28-3:16 (our Old Testament lesson) in which Joel describes the Day of the Lord as a time of cosmic upheaval and final judgment. Although a portion of Joel's prophecy is fulfilled by Christ's death and Pentecost, it is clear from Joel's words that the former events (Christ's death and Pentecost) ensure the final judgment and cosmic renewal at the end of the age.

Preterists—those who see the destruction of Jerusalem as the subject of the entire prophecy—contend that these things were fulfilled by the cosmic signs which were manifest when Jesus suffered upon the cross. This includes the earthquake, the sky turning dark as night in mid-day, as well as the signs which occurred in the sky when Jesus supposedly came in judgment upon Israel in A.D. 70. But we know from a parallel passage in Matthew 24 that this is the time when “*all the nations of the earth will mourn*” (v. 30). In other words, this is the day of final judgment, not just God's judgment upon Israel. Clearly then, Jesus is speaking of his second advent, which comes about only after the distress of those days has run its course—the “distress” of those days being a reference to those signs of the end which Jesus described as “birth pains.” Therefore, Jesus changes subjects from the destruction of Jerusalem to his second coming at the end of the age, just as the signs of which he is speaking change from earthly signs to cosmic signs.

In fact, when Jesus uses the phrase “in those days,” he's using a powerful image found in a number of Old Testament prophecies which speaks of a future tumultuous event (Jeremiah 3 and 31, Joel 2 and Zechariah 8).³ The point of this expression is clearly eschatological—Jesus is letting the disciples know that the cosmic signs of which he is now speaking are signs of the end, not just signs of the destruction of the temple. In speaking of these cosmic signs, Jesus is making sure that the disciples understand that the destruction of the temple—while near—is not the end of history. Rather, the destruction of the temple marks the end of an important era in redemptive history, the first phase of Jesus' prophecy. But the events which come to pass in A.D. 70, in turn, point ahead to the time of the end and our Lord's second advent—the second phase of Jesus' prophecy.

This brings us to the central event in all of New Testament eschatology—that event for which all Christians hope and which marks the end of time.

Says Jesus in verses 26-27, “*At that time men 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.*” These are utterly amazing words. Notice that Jesus is now speaking of those things *he* will do at the end of the age. He will come again. He will gather “his” elect. He does so because *he* is the “Son of Man” of Daniel 7:13-14. According to Daniel's prophecy, Daniel sees a figure who “*was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*” Jesus is not only claiming to be Daniel's “Son of Man,” he's also stating that his second coming is the realization of YHWH's everlasting kingdom as foretold by the prophet. Jesus is stating things of himself which throughout the Old Testament had only been used in reference to YHWH.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 475; Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 405.

³ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 474-475.

The critical difference between Daniel 7 and Jesus' words on the Mount of Olives is that in this instance, when Jesus speaks of his second advent, he does not speak of being led into the presence of the Ancient of Days (YHWH). Instead, Jesus states that at his coming, he will gather all the scattered people of God. Throughout the Old Testament this gathering of the saints is directly attributed to YHWH and is a key feature of the messianic age (Deuteronomy 30:3 ff; Psalm 50:3-5; Isaiah 43:6; 66:8; Jeremiah 32:37; Ezekiel 34:13; 36:24; Zechariah 2:6, 10).⁴ Jesus is stating that he will come in great power and glory, something properly assigned to YHWH. The imagery used by Jesus is a very familiar one to people of his day—a great hero-king riding on a magnificent chariot (this time on the clouds of heaven) who will be acknowledged by all (friend and foe alike) at the time of his grand arrival.

It is important for us to remember that in Mark 8:31, Jesus had previously spoken of the Son of Man as one who would be humbled and put to death—*“the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.”* Now we learn from Jesus himself that the Son of Man's suffering and humiliation will ultimately lead to his glorious vindication at the end of the age when Jesus returns in great power and glory. The implication should be clear. Jesus is the Lord of all things, including the angelic world. He commands the angels and they act. No longer will Jesus' identity be veiled to unbelievers, and understood only by his followers to whom this knowledge has been revealed.⁵

On that day when Jesus returns, the entire world will recognize him to be the very Son of God who has come in triumph to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. Let us not lose sight of the import of these amazing words. This is as clear an affirmation of Christ's deity as any passage in the New Testament. Jesus commands the angels. The elect are his. He comes in great power and unspeakable glory. This is the best day imaginable for God's people. All the open-ended promises will be a reality. Sin, sickness, and suffering will be gone in a flash. But this is the worst day imaginable for those who are not Christ's. This is the day in which their unbelief finally exposes them to eternal wrath. God's patience and long-suffering is now over.

According to Jesus, the grand climax of this coming of the Son of Man is the gathering together of the elect from the four-corners of the earth—as just noted, a very prominent theme throughout the Old Testament prophets as YHWH gathers together the scattered people of God from every country and from the ends of the earth (cf. Deuteronomy 30:3-4; Isaiah 11:12; 27:13; 56:8; Jeremiah 23:3; 29:12; 31:8; Ezekiel 11:17; 20:34; 41; 28:25; 34:12).⁶ Notice that there is no secret Rapture followed by a seven-year tribulation taught here. When Jesus comes again, this is when God gathers together his people at the time of final judgment. The key point here is that no longer will his people be characterized by race or national identity. The elect who are gathered together by Christ at his coming are now characterized by the fact that they are Christ's people (“his” elect). No longer will true Israel be centered around an earthly temple or a particular city (Jerusalem) or nation (Israel). Christ is both the true temple and the true Israel, and his elect now find their salvation in him.⁷ While there is no specific description about

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 476.

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 476.

⁶ Cited in; Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 476.

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 476.

how this gathering of the elect will occur, Jesus' primary point is that it *will* occur, and that when it does, the end of the age has come. Jesus will come to save his people, raise the dead, and judge all men. When his true glory is revealed, all the loose ends of redemptive history are finally tied up. This event is the blessed hope for every Christian—the longing to be that generation living when the Lord returns so that we need not taste death.

Having introduced the doctrine of his second advent in verses 23-27, Jesus returns again in verses 28-31 to the question put to him by the disciples about those signs which precede the destruction of the temple.

The fig tree is one of the few deciduous trees in Palestine, losing its leaves in winter. It blossoms late in the spring. Thus, when it buds, it is clear that winter has passed.⁸ Therefore, the fig tree—many of which were found on the Mount of Olives—makes a perfect subject of the parable found in verses 28-29. *“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.”* “These things” is very likely a reference to the signs enumerated in verses 5-23.⁹ When the signs are present, the events Jesus has just predicted are as certain to come to pass as the buds on the fig tree mean that winter is over. When the disciples see the signs, they know these events are about to come to pass. This means that we've been living in the last days since the coming of Jesus, and it is only the mercy of God which delays the final judgment.¹⁰ While scoffers mock Jesus with the words, “where is this coming you've promised” (2 Peter 3:4), they should realize that every breath they take is a gift from God. If Jesus should appear, his wrath would consume them, lest they repent. The delay in the Lord's return does not mean he's forgotten his promise. Rather, it means Jesus is merciful and patient. He will save every one of those given to him by the Father.

In verses 30-31, Jesus declares, *“I tell you the truth, 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.”* While some claim “this generation” is a reference to that generation living when Israel became a nation in 1948, this is utter nonsense. As we have seen, Jesus is answering specific questions put to him by the disciples. Context here is everything. Are we really to believe that Jesus was speaking about the modern nation of Israel, but not actually answering the questions put to him by the twelve? It makes far better sense to see Jesus informing the twelve that they would see the signs he had just enumerated very soon, and that everything he foretold, including the destruction of the temple as well as the signs of the end, would soon be evident. He can guarantee this to them, because his words will never pass away—another remarkable assertion since Jesus is stating that his words (and his predictions) are on a par with the word of YHWH. Jesus predicts the future, because he has ordained the future. His words will never pass away because he is God in human flesh—the clear implication of this assertion. In fact, everything he predicted came to pass in exacting detail, and this is the basis for our confidence in the second phase of the prophecy, that he will come again with great power and glory at the end of the age.

⁸ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 479.

⁹ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 407-408.

¹⁰ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 408.

As the discourse comes to an end, Jesus himself provides the application that his disciples (as well as the church) should draw from his words, which are crystal clear and absolutely inescapable.

Says Jesus in verse 32, *“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* Since Jesus is so clear about this, it simply amazes me that so many so blatantly ignore his warning and foolishly set dates for his return. Whether its Harold Camping, Chuck Smith, or Hal Lindsey, Scripture says “don’t do it.” Yet they do! Since no one knows when Jesus is coming back, about the only time you can be sure that Jesus won’t come back, is on that date some dunderhead has predicted it! Many a sincere but foolish saint has sat on a mountain top waiting for the time of the end. But Luther had it right. Someone once asked him what he would do if he knew the Lord was coming back tomorrow. He said, “I’d plant an apple tree today.” This should be our attitude to date-setters and end-times prognosticators. While we long for our Lord’s return, we must go about our business with a sense of purpose and hope. God will keep his promises even if we know not when. Meanwhile we must be faithful to our vocations as parents and providers, while the church seeks to the proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. This is what Jesus has commanded.

There is an important tension in this passage between signs which precede the end and the fact that our Lord can come back at any moment. This can be seen in the exhortation given by Jesus to his disciples in verses 33-37. *“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 his 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!’”* While specific signs precede his coming—wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, false Christs—nevertheless, we do not know the day or hour of his return. We cannot figure this out.

So, on the one hand, we are prevented from setting dates, while on the other, since Jesus can return at any moment, it is our sacred duty to watch and wait for our Lord’s return. Surely this tension between signs which precede his return and the suddenness of that return is intentional. We cannot set dates, nor can we be idle while we wait. We cannot sit on a mountain top and wait for Jesus to come back. Instead, we must be about our master’s business, lest he find us sleeping. Jesus commanded the disciples as well as his church “to watch” and to work. And this we must do.

Sadly, many Christians are so preoccupied with end-times, they are no earthly good. Date-setters and prophecy pundits have made so many false predictions and embarrassing claims that it is easy to react to their foolishness by ignoring or downplaying these exhortations to watch given to us directly by Jesus. But our Lord’s return is the blessed hope (Titus 2:13). Maybe we will be alive when the Lord returns. Perhaps we will never die but be caught up to be with the Lord! For when Jesus returns, righteousness will finally triumph. The bad guys will get theirs. There will be no more sin, no more injustice, no more sickness, no more suffering, and no more sorrow.

Therefore, every Christian should eagerly watch and patiently wait for our Lord’s return. The early church used the expression *Marantha* (“the Lord come”) as a benediction—1 Corinthians 16:22. So should we. Don’t forget that the Book of Revelation ends with a reminder from the Lord himself, *“surely, I am coming soon”* (Revelation 22:20). These are the final words of the New Testament. Therefore, while we wait for the Lord and go about our business, let us do as Jesus said, “watch,” and let us comfort and encourage each other with these words, “Maranatha! Come quickly Lord Jesus!”