

THE GOSPEL OF MARK
Mark 13:1—14:72

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Mark's thirteenth chapter is a difficult part of Scripture for us twenty-first century Christians to understand. Its imagery is Jewish in form and draws heavily on the words of such Old Testament prophets as Daniel, Amos, Isaiah, and Joel. Sometimes referred to as "the little apocalypse," this chapter offers a particular way of thinking about the present and the future. Apocalyptic writings often strike us as being extremely pessimistic because the future is viewed as a time of destruction and disaster—a time in which it may appear that God is not in control. Yet, the apocalyptic writer is ever looking beyond that time to when everything will be under God's power.

In Lesson 6 we left Jesus and His disciples teaching in the temple. Now, the scene shifts. After going just a short distance from the temple, they look back at the beauty of that magnificent structure. After gazing at this familiar sight, one of the disciples exclaimed, "**Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!**" (13:1). Instead of responding with an appropriate comment on their loyalty, as we would have, Jesus made a shocking statement, "**Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down**" (13:2). This idea seemed ridiculous to the disciples as they stared at the huge stones that were fitted together so perfectly. Indeed, the temple's solid structure gave every appearance of being able to stand until the end of time.

Moving on to the slopes of the Mount of Olives, Jesus and His disciples sat down to talk at a viewpoint—stretched out below and beyond was the temple and the holy city. It was here that Peter, James, John, and Andrew pulled Jesus aside from the rest of the group and asked Him two important questions that referred to His earlier comment about the temple: "**When shall these things be?**" and "**What shall be the sign when all these things shall be fulfilled?**" (13:4).

In response to these questions, Jesus clarified His prophetic comments about the temple, by speaking apocalyptically in verses 14-20 of the devastation that would level and lay waste the city of Jerusalem. And in verses 9-13, He warned them of the horrible suffering that believers would have to endure in the coming years. Then in verses 7 and 8, and 24 through 27, He drew aside the curtain and revealed certain

conditions and events that will occur at the time of Jesus' return to earth at the end of the age.

With that in mind, let us briefly examine Jesus' words as He talked with the four disciples. To the ones He had said, ***"Follow!"*** Jesus now adds a second command, ***"Watch!"*** The discussion itself starts in the middle of 13:5 and takes up the rest of the chapter. Verses 5-23 offer three warnings about signs that point to future events.

First, false messiahs will appear, claiming to be worthy of allegiance. ***"For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many" (13:6).*** Next, ***"wars and rumors of wars"*** will be identified as signs of the end, but Jesus warns against being deceived, for ***"the end shall not be yet" (13:7).*** Third, many natural disasters will occur, such as earthquakes and famine. These, too, are reasons for sorrow, but the context of the passage indicates that they do not mean the End Time has arrived.

Verses 9-13 bring the issue home to Mark's readers. Jesus here reminds His followers that they will be persecuted— ***"delivered up to councils"*** and beaten in synagogues. The early Christians were experiencing such aggrievement, and Jesus' words had the clear and painful ring of reality. From the perspective of the four disciples, the events were yet to come. From the viewpoint of Mark's earliest readers, the persecution had begun.

Notice the way Jesus saw trials and tribulations. He viewed them as a means for proclaiming the Good News. Believers used their persecution and even their martyrdom, as a way of testifying to the redeeming power of Christ. When we read about their suffering, we often get the impression that it was those who judged and persecuted them who were on trial—not the believers. Jesus encouraged His followers to have confidence that the Holy Spirit would sustain and guide them in all kinds of frightening situations: ***"...take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do you premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost!" (13:11).***

The irony/humor of history is that Christianity was nurtured because of persecution. Christians who fled in fear of their lives became missionaries in new places. Those who suffered and died left an impression of courage and faithfulness that inspired others. Mark is calling his readers to endure to the end.

Verses 14-23 are hard to understand fully, and most commentators offer only educated guesses, at best, as to their precise meaning. The phrase in verse 14, ***"the abom-***

ination of desolation” has its origin in Daniel 9:27; 11:31; and 12:11. It is basically believed this refers to the pagan pollution of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes who tried to stamp out the Jewish religion and replace it with Greek thought and customs. He desecrated the temple by offering swine’s flesh on the great altar and by setting up brothels in the sacred courts. It is not clear in this verse just what sort of abominable/vile acts were predicted.

Whatever form it took, it would be terrible. Jesus saw the coming tragedy in human terms—the misery caused to farmers working in the fields (13:16) and the pain to pregnant women and those with babies (13:17). Verses 15-18 can be understood either as words of warning to believers in Jerusalem or as a warning about the end of the world. Herod’s temple, begun in 20 B.C. and famous for its beauty, was completely destroyed in A.D. 70 as Jesus had predicted, so Mark’s readers could have easily connected Jesus’ words to this event.

Few events in history could match the horror that come with the fall of Jerusalem. Titus and his Roman legions laid siege to the city. Over one million people died and almost 100,000 were taken captive. The images Jesus used years before this happened was no exaggeration.

Then Jesus again warned His followers to ***“take heed”*** and look out for bogus prophets (21-23). Even the most faithful followers can be tempted (***“seduced”***) by false messiahs. His words were true then and continue to be relevant now, for dark times breed those who exploit the fears and miseries of others. The notorious/wicked Jim Jones is a case in point.

The people who followed him to their deaths in Guyana were seeking a way out of poverty and misery. Others who shared his cup of poison were idealists/fanatics dissatisfied with the hypocrisy of both the world and the church. The danger was, and is, real, and the problem with recognizing false prophets from true is like choosing between good mushrooms and bad ones. Sometimes we do not know which is which until it is too late.

A shift in the time frame is provided in verse 24: ***“...in those days, after that tribulation...”*** In other words, the end of the age will come and all these other troubles—wars, persecutions, famines, false messiahs—will prove to have been just preliminaries. The real End Time will be marked by the coming of the Son of Man.

Verses 24-27 must have been difficult for the early believers, for their expectation that the end was very near—in their lifetimes—did not come true. The verses are

difficult for us, too, and for similar reasons. We are still muddling along, making many mistakes and seeing all the preliminary signs. The earliest believers may have become impatient as they waited for the Son to come, but we have had many more years of waiting—nearly two thousand—to dampen our sense of expectancy. We have reason to ask even more loudly than first-century believers, “How much longer?”

As we reread these verses, and review them now as we should, it is helpful to see that in His use of apocalyptic language Jesus has described two events: the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the Second Coming of Christ. In responding to the question of the four disciples, He uses the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem as a springboard to go beyond what they had asked originally—to the End Times. The signs are much the same, and they continue to be. In a real sense, every age is apocalyptic.

As if anticipating our mood, the chapter concludes with two parables that speak to our dilemma. The parable of the fig tree undergirds hope in the coming of the Son of Man and suggests that it is an forthcoming event: “...***this generation shall not pass till all these things be done***” (13:30). That it did not happen within the lifetime of Mark is troublesome to us, but, with all its problems, the verse conveys a dramatic sense of urgency.

When connected with the concluding parable of the chapter about the absent master (13:34-37), a universal message for all generations occurs: *be ready*. Here Jesus tells a parable about a man who went on a journey. Before the man left home, he put his servants in charge, each with his own work assignment. He instructed the porter or doorkeeper to be alert, “***Watch ye therefor: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping***” (13:35-36).

This is an important passage, and anyone who considers it irrelevant because Jesus did not return in the first century will miss the larger message—the responsibility to be faithful now, to live as if Jesus will return tomorrow. This larger message applies to everyone, for life ends with death and this passage of Scripture calls us to be faithful in whatever time we have. It also speaks powerfully to oppressed people, like the slaves in this country who sang, “*My Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall!*”

A story is told about Tolstoy, the renowned Russian writer, makes the point. One day while he was working in his garden, a man approached him and asked, “Sir,

what would you do if you suddenly learned you had but one day to live?” Tolstoy replied, “I would continue working in my garden.”

His point is clear. Those who live in the present as His faithful disciples, trust that the Son of Man will come again as He promised. They are on watch. They are ready. They do not, at the last minute, need to run around “fixing” their lives should the world—or their lives—end the next day.

So, the vision of the future in Chapter 13, as difficult as it is to understand, strengthens discipleship in the present. It warns us against religious phonies who would exploit the dark times of life. It sustains us in whatever persecution we are called to endure. It challenges us to get on with our own proclamations of the gospel. And it reminds us (verse 32) that no one except God knows when the end time will arrive—a timely warning for those who lose valuable time in speculation.

The final days of Jesus’ human life are recorded in Mark 14-16. As he has done before, Mark tells one story inside another in the opening verses of Chapter 14. Verses 1-2 and 10-11 sandwich the account of a woman who anoints Jesus at a dinner party. The surrounding verses reveal the plot of the chief priests and scribes to use Judas to capture Jesus at an opportune time. The beauty of the woman’s act of anointing Jesus compares with the ugliness and hostility of the evil setting.

The cooperation of Judas fits a pattern of misunderstanding and rejection that described Jesus’ family, friends, and disciples. Time after time those closest to Jesus have seemed to understand Him less and reject Him more than those who did not have an intimate relationship with Him. Judas now becomes the example of this.

These verses (1-2; 10-11) indicate the reason the chief priests were pleased when Judas went to them with an offer to betray Jesus. They were excited to arrest and prosecute Him, but they were also fearful of the reactions of the crowd. And Jerusalem was jam-packed with pilgrims who had flocked to the holy city to celebrate. The remembrance of their deliverance from Egypt increased, so, any public arrest of Jesus might provoke a riot. Therefore, Judas’ offer to help them separate Jesus and have Him arrested without a public commotion played right into their hands. Now, they could capture Him before the people knew what happened.

This leads us now to an important question: Why did Judas betray Jesus? Readers have pondered this question for centuries. Some say Judas betrayed Him for money. Everyone has a price, this line of thinking goes, and Judas had his. Others suggest that Judas wanted to force Jesus to display His divine power. Still other commenta-

tors speculate that Judas acted out of personal disappointment at Jesus' failure to be the political messiah Judas and most people wanted. We do not really know why Judas betrayed Jesus. But his act of betrayal marked his name forever with disgrace and shame.

While the scribes work together with Judas, Jesus had gone to a dinner party (14:3-9). It was in the Jerusalem suburb of Bethany at the home of Simon the leper. And while Jesus was eating, ***“there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box and poured it on his head” (14:3).***

The woman who anointed Jesus' head is totally anonymous in Mark's Gospel. The “alabaster box of ointment” was probably a vase containing an oil extract from the nard plant, which is native to India. Nard was used for two reasons very different in their purpose: to perfume hair, and to anoint the dead.

But once again those closest to Jesus miss the deeper point of the event as they focus on the obvious. They ask: ***Why waste the ointment? (14:4).*** They believed that it could have been used for some practical purpose. Jesus, however, approved of her act because of its timeliness. Jesus knew its symbolism signified His coming death. Further, it was a selfless act of love. Jesus understood this and honored her for it, ***“Let her alone; why trouble ye her? She hath wrought a good work on me” (14:6).*** The story of this woman is an example of love that is spontaneous and sacrificial. There are times when we need to celebrate our love in elaborate or even foolish ways.

The countdown continues. Mark says in **14:12** that ***“on the first day of unleavened bread,”*** the disciples asked about Jesus' plans for celebrating the Passover meal. Evidently Jesus had already made arrangements with some friends, and now He sent two disciples ahead to complete preparations. There was nothing random about the plan. Jesus told His disciples to look for a man carrying a pitcher of water and to follow him. For us, this might seem like a risky means of identification.

But carrying a water pitcher was something a man would not normally do because that was what a woman would do. There were probably only one such man in all the city, so the disciples had no trouble locating him. They followed him and when he arrived at a certain house, he went in. Then they spoke to the owner, saying, ***“The Master saith where is the guest chamber”*** where Jesus and His disciples shall eat the Passover? In response to what was apparently a prearranged signal, the owner took them to an upper room where they made the necessary preparations.

Verse 17 marks a shift in time and place. It is evening and they are all gathered in the upper room to share the Passover meal. While they eat, Jesus makes a shocking announcement, ***“One of you which eateth with me shall betray me” (14:18).*** Each one questioned Jesus, ***“Is it I?”*** No one had any idea that it was Judas.

Jesus did, but He does not reveal the name of the betrayer to others. It was as if Jesus were letting Judas be responsible for his own deed, for sure the other disciples would have prevented Judas from acting had they known his intentions.

The Passover meal that night became what we know as the Last Supper, and it provided symbolic summary of what had been unfolding in the life of Jesus. In that meal we have the theme of *sacrifice*: ***“This is my body...This is my blood.”*** There is the message of *atonement*: ***“This is my blood of the new testament which is shed for many.”*** And there is the promise of a *reunion* with Jesus in a joyous fellowship beyond the cross: ***“I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine, until that day that I drink it new in the Kingdom of God” (14:25).*** Jesus in that final Passover meal was doing symbolically what He was going to do the next day.

There is no doubt that the love and affection shared that night by Jesus and His closest followers was genuine. When Jesus handed the cup to His disciples, it symbolized the life and suffering they were to share. When the meal was concluded, Mark tells us that ***“when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives” (14:26).***

Despite His disciples’ love for Him, Jesus knew He would soon be alone. He knew that all of them, not just Judas, would fall away, for He told them that they would ***“be offended,”*** which means to *“stumble over an obstacle,”* or *“fall into a trap.”* Of all the pain Jesus was to endure, none was greater than the realization that He would be abandoned by all. The Shepherd would die, and the sheep would be scattered (14:27).

Impetuous (foot-in-mouth) Peter would have none of this kind of talk. He strongly contradicted Jesus with a vow, ***“Although all shall be offended, yet will not I” (14:29).*** The others sounded off, adding their own affirmations of loyalty. But Jesus knew better, and He confronted Peter eyeball to eyeball, ***“Verily I say unto thee, that this day, even in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shall deny me thrice” (14:30).***

While the phrase “cock crow” may have referred to the early morning crowing of a rooster, probably it was instead a reference to the Roman trumpet call announcing

the beginning of the fourth watch at 3:00 a. m. A bugle ‘call’ always announced the changing of the guard, and this was referred to as the “cockcrow.” Jesus told Peter that before the fourth watch began, he would deny Him three times.

No scene in the New Testament captures both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus as fully as that in the Garden of Gethsemane. The drama has narrowed, so that Jesus was alone with His three most trusted disciples. Peter, James, and John, who have just declared their absolute loyalty to Jesus, fall asleep when Jesus asks them to stand watch while He prays.

After spending time alone in agonizing prayers, ‘Jesus’ returned to where the disciples were waiting and found them asleep. Jesus then said to Peter, “***Simon, sleepest thou? Couldst not thou watch one hour?***” (14:37). Notice now that Jesus uses the name “Simone,” as calling the sleeping disciples by his new name, “Peter” or “rock,” was unsuitable now. Already they had fulfilled His prediction of falling away by falling asleep. This same scene was presented two more times.

But back to Jesus’ prayer. It demonstrated two things: human agony and divine faithfulness. He knew without doubt that His death was within the will of God, but that knowledge did not calm His intense feelings of abandonment, anguish, and sorrow. Jesus had no martyr complex. There is no indication at this point that He faced death peacefully, and ‘His’ human anguish allows us to comprehend something of the pain of that moment.

A more literal translation of what Jesus experienced is, “***He began to be terrified and disoriented.***” Out of the deep distress of His soul Jesus used the Aramaic phrase for “father,” which is *abba*. It connotes the more informed “daddy.” From this we can conclude that Jesus is in the situation of a helpless child who recognizes his helplessness and cries out, “Daddy!”

At this point Jesus had every reason to run for His life. Instead, though, He returned to where His disciples were sleeping and said, “***Rise up, let us go; lo, he that betrayeth me is at hand***” (14:42).

Suddenly the action shifts from a lonely struggle to a mob scene. Judas comes into the Garden leading a pack of authorities who were carrying swords and staves. Following through with his prearranged identification signal, Judas approaches Jesus, “***and saith Master, master and kissed him***” (14:45). And with that, Jesus is arrested on the spot. It is interesting to note here that the word Mark uses for “kiss” represents intimacy; it means to kiss as a lover kisses his beloved. It was customary to greet a

rabbi with a kiss. To do so was just a sign of respect and affection. A lover's kiss, however, adds a note of tenderness to this scene.

Jesus' response to the arrest is that of fearless human dignity. A few minutes before, alone in the Garden, He had poured out His soul to God. Now in the face of a hostile mob, His quiet courage provides a model for everyone of all time who may face persecution.

Next, Jesus asks the obvious question that exposes the crowd's cowardice, "***Are ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and with staves to take me? I was daily with you in the temple teaching, and ye took me not***" (14:48-49). Cowards run in packs and do their worst under cover of darkness.

In comparison to Jesus' quiet courage, the disciples panicked. "***One of them that stood by***" ***drew a sword and cut off the ear of a servant of the high priest*** (14:47), but Mark does not elaborate on the incident, and the impression is left that it was a weak, meaningless gesture. Next, Mark also records the story of a young man who was so frightened, he ran away literally without his clothes. Now Jesus is left to walk the lonesome road alone.

After taking 'Jesus' captive and directing Him to the high priest's palace, the chief priests, elders, and scribes gathered in an official, if irregular, meeting of the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish council. It was "official" in the sense that legal vocabulary was used, i.e., words like witness, testimony, and condemned. Also, some judicial procedures were followed: two witnesses were sought to provide common testimony. But the "trial" was irregular, to say the least, because the verdict was predetermined (14:55) and the evidence was false (14:56, 57, 59). Any appearance of fair play was absent. The Sanhedrin that night was a kangaroo court.

The religious authorities, however, got what they wanted. In examining Jesus, the high priest asked Him a leading question, "***Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?***" (14:61). Time after time, as we have seen, Jesus outwitted His opponents whenever they attempted to catch Him in a convicting response. This moment is the moment of truth. It is time to be done with the whole dirty business. Jesus' Messiahship is no longer a secret to be gradually revealed. His death is certain, whatever His answer to the question. So, He replies, "***I am, and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven***" (14:62). His answer angers the high priest who tears his clothes and shouts that Jesus has blasphemed.

The Jewish leaders finally had the “confession” they wanted. To claim to be the Messiah was one charge they could pass on with some clouts to the Roman court. The fact that Jesus meant something entirely different by the word run into hiding like the rest of the disciples, and He may have inwardly hung to the belief that He would be faithful to the end.

The account of Peter’s denial had special meaning for early believers who read it in Mark’s Gospel. They, too, were continually being tested in courts and, more often, in the common dialogues of life. The accusation brought three times against Peter is that he was “*with Jesus of Nazareth*”—guilty by association.

In three stages Peter caved in. First, he pleaded ignorance, “*I know not, neither understand I what thou sayest*” (14:68). Next, he denied being one of Jesus’ disciples when a maid said, “*This is one of them.*” A third time he was accused, by virtue of his Galilean speech, of being a follower of Jesus. This time Peter’s denial came with cursing. He denied Jesus himself, “*I know not this man of whom ye speak*” (14:71). Then the bugle sounded. The “cockcrowing” reminded Peter that Jesus’ prediction had come to pass. And the pain of what he had done drove him to tears.

Peter’s denial was reported by Mark, and there is good reason to believe that Mark got the story indirectly from Peter himself. Peter’s story does not end with his denial, for he went on to become the “rock” Jesus call him to be.

Like Peter, we also claim our undying loyalty to Christ, and the bugle calls of personal security remind us of our denials. For the first-century believers to whom Mark wrote, Peter’s denial was a warning and a promise. They, and we, are warned that to identify with Christ and His church is to invite possible death, and denial is always a temptation. But all of us who are believers are left with the promise that Christ will be with us when the question comes, “Are you one of His disciples?” To say “yes,” even today, requires courage and the help of Christ.

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