

**Mark:
Back to the Future (Part 2)**

Mark 13:1-37

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Now turn with me, if you would, to Mark 13. This is, as I said, one of the most, if not the most...it's certainly one of a half dozen chapters in the Bible that I would regard as the most difficult to interpret, and there are a wide range of opinions about some aspects of the exposition of this chapter, even within the confines of our own circles...perhaps even here in the church, and perhaps even among some of my colleagues. I didn't actually ask them...Ligon...what his view is of *the abomination that causes desolation* from the Book of Daniel actually is, but...and that because it would only make me more nervous!

I suggested last week that what we actually have here in what is sometimes called "The Olivet Discourse." You remember Jesus and His disciples have left the temple precincts now; they've crossed over the Kidron Valley, they have climbed the Mount Olivet to the south of the city, and perhaps (we don't know quite where they are on Mount Olivet) they're half way up or three quarters of the way up, or maybe even on top of it. And they are probably looking down now on Mount Zion, which is before them, and on Mount Zion and occupying the vast majority of the top of Mount Zion is of course the temple, the grand Herodian temple as expanded by Herod the Great. And it's at that point that Jesus begins to answer a question that has been raised by the disciples on their way out of the city, possibly initially by Judas in observing the great stones of the city, and then the question that comes from four of the disciples.

Let's pick up Mark 13. I said last week this was the history of the world from the time of Jesus until the Second Coming in two parts, but in one hour. So let's turn once again to the reading of God's word. And before we read the chapter, let's pray together.

Our Father, again, this is Your word. You have caused it to be written. You breathed this word out and into the mouths and through the penmanship of the apostles, and we thank You for it, that it is a light unto our path. Fill us with understanding and grant the illumination of Your Spirit, that we might read, mark, learn and inwardly digest, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now hear with me the word of God.

As [Jesus] was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down."

As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?" And Jesus began to say to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He!' and will mislead many. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be frightened; those things must take place; but that is not yet the end. For nation will arise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will also be famines. These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.

"But be on your guard; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. When they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by all because of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.

"But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where it should not be (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. The one who is on the housetop must not go down, or go in to get anything out of his house, and the one who is in the field must not turn back to get his coat. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray that it may not happen in the winter. For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never will. Unless the Lord had shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect whom He chose, He shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ'; or, 'Behold, He is there'; do not believe him; for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders in order to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance.

"But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the

moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth, to the farthest end of heaven.

“Now learn a parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. Even so you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

“Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come. It is like a man away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Therefore, be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. What I say to you I say to all, Be on the alert!”

Amen. And may God add His blessing to the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now. Last Tuesday we were looking at this chapter and we saw that Andrew and Peter and James and John asked the question in response to something that Jesus has said...that the stones of the temple...“Do you see these great buildings?” [in verse 2] “Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down,” and that in response to something one of the disciples said about how wonderful the Herodian temple actually was, and the suggestion has been made that that may have been Judas.

And now on the Mount of Olives these four disciples ask the question, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?” (Vs. 4.) And it's very crucial for the interpretation of the Olivet Discourse that we understand verse 4 to imply that there are actually two questions being asked, and two different questions, but related questions, being asked: one in relation to the downfall and destruction of Jerusalem, beginning in 68 A.D. and ending in the middle of 70 A.D.; and the second question, related to it but also distinct from it, a question relating to the Second Coming, to the end of all things, to the consummation itself.

And in the course of this Olivet Discourse Jesus is replying to one or other of those questions, and it's not always clear which question He is answering, He is

alluding to. And that, I wanted to suggest last week, is because the very downfall of Jerusalem was in itself a kind of symbol and portent of the Second Coming. It was, as it were, a cameo picture of the conflagration that will come at the end of the age, and I think the disciples were meant to view the one as speaking of and symbolizing and signaling the coming of the other. And Jesus is able to switch from one to the other for the reason that the next great redemptive event is in fact the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, we said last week...drew from this passage...three points: first of all, that history is "His story", that at least from this passage we can tease out that principle, that everything that happens from now to the fall of Jerusalem in the course of the speaking of Jesus now - from the time of Jesus to the fall of Jerusalem to the Second Coming - all of it is under the control and at the behest of the gubernatorial, the sovereign intervention and display of power of our Almighty God. History is His story.

Secondly, that history is going to end; that in one form or another there is going to be an end to history, that there is going to be a destruction, a burning up of this world and a creation of the new heavens and the new earth. History is going to end.

And thirdly, we saw last week that history is going to end...we just don't know when. And it was at that point that the clock beat me, and I want to pick it up now from there and add three more points to this, so this will technically be point No. 4, and that is that history is going to end in the triumph of Jesus Christ at His return.

IV. History is going to end in the triumph of Jesus Christ at His return.

Jesus is going to return and history is going to be brought to its close in the triumph of Jesus.

Now before we can say anything about the triumph of Jesus, we have to look at some significant verses in this passage. For example, in verse 19:

"For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never will."

Jesus is speaking of a time of immense trouble, of immense tribulation, and that word itself signals something that Daniel speaks of in the opening verse of Daniel 12, and the archangel Michael, you remember, warning the elect what will befall them at the end of time.

Some view verse 19 as a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and others view it actually as a portent of the end of time itself. It is, I have to say,

something of a jargon word, and something of a technical word in the Bible, and it would suggest to me that even if the immediate reference is to the destruction of Jerusalem it is also a reference to the end of time and to those constellation of events that occur at the Second Coming, the *parousia* of Jesus, and suggesting perhaps that prior to the return of Jesus there may well be a period of tribulation, a period of apostasy. Certainly that would be in accord with other passages of Scripture — the battle of Armageddon, for example, in the Book of Revelation, in Revelation 20: that battle of the great plains of the earth, suggesting Gog and Magog, you remember, from the Book of Ezekiel; and the fact that Satan will be released for a little while after the thousand years is ended; a period, then, of tribulation and trial prior to the return of Jesus Christ.

Now, post-millennialists among you will not like that. That doesn't fit into a post-millennial vision of the future (a sort of Christianizing of the world prior to the return of Jesus); and, therefore, passages like this have to be fulfilled and pushed back to A.D. 70 to allow for a more positive and therefore post-millennial view of the end. My own view, for what it's worth, is that this seems to me to be signaling that prior to the return of Jesus there will indeed be a great apostasy, but there will indeed be times of great trial and tribulation and suffering. But after that, certainly by verse 24, we have language which is apocalyptic and descriptive, I think, not of Jerusalem, but of the very end itself:

“In those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken, and then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.”

And there's no way you can convince me that that is a reference to Jerusalem in A.D. 70. That is language that speaks of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

And following that period of tribulation, Jesus returns, and He returns not as He comes (as we're about to celebrate at Christmas) in a divested form of glory: His glory hidden and veiled in human flesh, and born in some obscure little town called Bethlehem, and having to flee immediately into Egypt; but coming now in power and glory, and in all of the display of His resplendent, divine regalia, with who He is in His very essence being emblazoned, as it were, shining forth from His face as He comes on the clouds of heaven with the shout of the archangel, the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ will arise, and those who are alive will be caught up to meet Him in the air.

It's the Second Coming of Jesus. That's why...I don't know how familiar you were, it didn't sound as though you were terribly familiar with that hymn...it was in the first edition of *The Trinity Hymnal*, (you know, the blue edition of *The Trinity Hymnal*) of

“He is coming again, He is coming again,

the very same Jesus rejected of men.
He is coming again, He is coming again,
with power and great glory He is coming again”

- and you need almost like a Wurlitzer™ organ to sort of bring that great crescendo to its great climax, because it's a great triumph note that is trying to be sounded there: that Jesus is coming again, and He's coming again in victory, He's coming again in power and in great glory.

Well, a fifth point, then. Number four was that history is going to end in the triumph of Jesus Christ and His return.

V. History is ending with signs of the times

Fifthly, history is ending with signs of the times...signs of the times. And what are those signs of the times?

There are three kinds of signs that are alluded to here. First of all, signs of judgment. We will read in verse 7, for example, of wars and rumors of wars, of a world that is under strain, of a world that is tearing apart, of a world that is feeling all of the effects of sin and the fall, and a world that is anticipating and longing for the regeneration of all things, when God will recreate ...not, I think, out of nothing...not burn this world into nothingness and recreate... but refashion the world as it ought to have been.

I remember hearing a Presbyterian minister in Belfast who is now in heaven — died at a young age, very influential minister of the gospel, a man by name of Alan Flavel, and I remember hearing him say in a sermon once, “We get all anxious and run to God when the foundations are shaking, only to find that He is the One who is shaking them.” We run to God when the foundations are shaking, only to find that He is the One who is shaking them, and we live in a world — just turn on the news, just read the front page of any newspaper, and what do you see? Wars and rumors of wars, signs of judgment, signs of God having given up a people to unrighteousness.

Secondly, signs of opposition. In verse 9 and again in verse 12, and again in verse 22, we read of false prophets and false Christs tempting you to say ‘Here is Christ, and here is Christ’ of false philosophies and false world views, and false (forgive me) epistemologies, and all of them promising coherence and integration and an explanation of the meaning of life and so on. And they were present in Jesus’ time, and they are certainly present in our time. Evil doers and imposters will grow worse and worse, Paul says in II Timothy 3. Examples of opposition to the gospel, and opposition to the Bible, and opposition to godliness and holiness, and I don't have to convince you that we live in a world that's full of opposition to Jesus Christ, and full of opposition to godliness and holiness and Christ-likeness.

And a third sign of Jesus' coming is signs of God's grace, and you read that in verse 10. The gospel will be preached in all the nations. This is a positive sign, that before Jesus comes again the gospel will be preached in all of the nations. That's one of the signs, and we see that, and you ask yourself 'How can that be compatible with tribulation and wars, and rumors of wars, and a period of apostasy prior to the return of Jesus?' and all I can do is cite, I think it was A.B. Kuyper, who said that the condition of the earth is getting better and worse at the same time: that the gospel is spreading, the church is growing, there are more Christians in the world than ever there was, but at the same time there is more opposition and there is hostility and there is difficulty, and the two can indeed live together.

But why is Jesus telling the disciples about these signs? To what end, and to what purpose is Jesus telling the disciples of these signs of judgment and signs of opposition, signs of God's grace? And it's not so that we can read the signs and predict from the signs by some mathematical formula the date of Jesus' return, so that you can go (and, if you want to amuse yourself, you can go to a website called "prophecynewswatch.com", and amusing it certainly is) and you can see someone has gone to enormous detail to try and do just that, so reading things like "The Defense Department is conducting secret drills, suggesting that a nuclear explosion is detonated in a certain city, a sign that Jesus is about to return!" or "the withdrawal of Israelis from Gaza" is another one; that the European economic community is building a network of satellites and allowing Brussels to insure that nation-states are obeying its policies; and that global monitoring for environment and security is up and running by 2010; or that Iran is starting an attack upon the world, endangering the oil supplies in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (suggesting Gog and Magog, you understand), or that the markets are now promoting something called Verichip®, an implantable chip the size of a grain of rice, suggesting perhaps the mark of the beast, or a wristband credit card for a cashless society, and on and on and on. And the whole point of trying to discern these things is to compute that Jesus is coming again, perhaps within the next few weeks, or the next few months, or the next few years.

Now, all of those things I've just mentioned are in a broad category prophetically significant. They are indeed signs of the times. They are indeed signs of judgment. They are indeed signs of opposition, perhaps. They are indeed signs of God's grace, even. But they're not signs that enable us to predict with any degree of certainty on a mathematical clock, on a calendar clock, when Jesus is coming again. All that they tell us is that He is coming again, and that coming again is near in the biblical sense of near: that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years is with the Lord as one day; near in the sense that the next great redemptive event is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. It is not the conversion of Jews to Christ; it is not some political redrawing of the map in the Middle East; it is not some scientific invention that somehow implants a Verichip beneath the epidermis or whatever. That's not the next great

redemptive event.

The next great redemptive event is the Second Coming of Jesus, and in that sense it is near! It is near because we cannot predict it. We don't know when it will be, and even if there is to be a period of tribulation before Jesus comes, even if there is to be the appearance of the man of sin, or the man of lawlessness, or the antichrist, or Armageddon, or the Battle of Gog and Magog, all of those things can happen within our lifetime. They can happen within a very brief span of time, so we must live as though Jesus is coming again within our lifetime. That, it seems to me, is how the Bible urges us to live.

VI. History's end means (and this is a really important and solemn point) that we should be ready for it.

And that brings me to my sixth and final point (I suppose I should have had seven, really, to avoid any misunderstanding here, but I only had six): that history's end means (and this is a really important and solemn point) that we should be ready for it...that we should be ready for it.

You notice at the end of the chapter, verse 33-37, “stay alert...take heed...” It's repeated again and again, the twin ideas of watchfulness and preparedness. And even back in verse 23, He tells the disciples (probably with Jerusalem's destruction in mind) that He is telling them these things in advance in order that they may be ready, that it mightn't catch them unawares.

I can't remember now whether I told you this last week or not, but I'll tell you again, and forgive me if I'm repeating myself. (I'm getting old.) But of the dear, dearest saints that I've met in my entire life were two sisters. I've mentioned them to you before at some point — the Miss Speirs, Madge and Anna Speirs. Madge Speirs was 101 just a few months ago, and received on her 100th birthday the obligatory telegram from the Queen congratulating her on reaching her 100th birthday.

There were three sisters. All three of them lived together; none of them were married. They were at every meeting. We've got their equivalence here, in the sense that they are the most loyal folk to the church on earth! They're at every meeting. If the church has a meeting, they're there. Every prayer meeting they were just encouragers, and they were just wonderful, wonderful sisters.

And I remember going to visit them one day, and a day I was deeply discouraged about something or another, and they were trying to cheer me up as a twenty-something pastor. And I remember asking them (you know the sort of naive questions you ask and you sort of wish you hadn't asked them)...I asked them had they ever been to the cinema, and Madge Speirs, somewhat red-faced, said to me, “Yes.” She said, “We went once in 1937, and we walked out half-way

through the movie because we all three of us felt that Jesus might come again and find us in this cinema.” And they never ever went to the cinema after that!

Now, whatever you think in terms of a world and life view, all of those things apart, you've got to admire the courage of their convictions. You've got to admire that kind of godliness. It's old-fashioned godliness, it's somewhat fundamentalist godliness, but it's godliness. They had the courage of their convictions that God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left us free from the doctrines and commandments of men, but as far as they were concerned this was the word of God for them, and they were not going to break it for anybody or for anything. But what motivated them, what dominated their thinking was the possibility that Jesus could come again.

Now I don't personally believe that Jesus can come again in the next minute. (Now the Lord may rebuke me now in the next minute, and we'll smile about it in heaven.) But I do believe that, for example in verse 10, 'the gospel must be preached in all the world', and if my understanding of missiology is correct, there are many, many, many people groups in the world that have yet to hear an adequate presentation of the gospel. But I believe that that could happen in a very short space of time, and I certainly believe that we ought to live our lives not so much with the imminent return of Jesus, the “any moment” return of Jesus, but certainly with the impending return of Jesus: that Jesus could return within our lifetime, within a very short space of time.

And I'm not sure that we live our lives like that. I'm not sure how much a part of our everyday thinking the Second Coming of Jesus actually is, but in the Bible it's a dominating feature of the way the early Christians lived their lives. They lived their lives with the coming of Jesus of Bethlehem, the death of Jesus on the cross, and the Second Coming of Jesus on the clouds of heaven in their minds, and the perspective by which they lived their lives.

Jesus tells here a parable of a fig tree: that when that fig tree in the early spring sends forth its blossom, it's saying summer is coming. It's not saying summer is coming in the next minute, but it's saying summer is coming soon. Now here in Mississippi you can get some false starts with those summers! But be ready, Jesus is saying. Be prepared. Be prepared.

Ah, one of the ladies over there wanted to shout “Hallelujah!” after singing that hymn, *He Is Coming Again*. And shouldn't that be the dominating feature of how we live our lives? That we are packed up and ready to go? That we don't put down roots that go too deep into the soil of this world, because this world is not our home? Because the Lord Jesus is going to take this world and refashion it and make out of it a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell.

Why should we be ready? Because of what happens when Jesus comes again

with the clouds of heaven. And what is that, you say. The dead in Christ will rise; those who are alive will be caught up to meet Him in the air. They will be ushered before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of the deeds that have been done in the body. There will be the great white throne of judgment, the *grand assize* of all time, when Jesus will say on His right hand, "Come, come ye blessed of My Father, and inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you and the angels from before the foundation of the world." And then to others on His left He will say, "Depart from Me, ye accursed, into everlasting fire, for I never knew you."

And that's why we need to be ready. We need to be ready because our relationship to Jesus now will determine whether we are on the right hand or the left hand of Jesus at the Judgment Day. And may God enable us, you and I, to be ready and to live our lives in that way.

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You again for the glory of Your word, how through even this complex chapter You speak such clear truths: that we do indeed need to be ready, that we need to be in Christ; we need to be persevering in the faith; we need to be using the gifts and talents that You have given to us for Your glory; we need to be out and out for Jesus Christ; we need to be witnessing to friends and neighbors and family about the urgency of the hour. We ask that You would have mercy upon us. We pray that You would hide Your word now within our hearts, and we would say 'Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly.' Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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