

The End Times

A Time to Rejoice, Affirm Trust in Jesus, and Testify for Jesus

Sermon Covenant and Doctrine Sermon on the Olivet Discourse

Mark 13:1-23

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4

Scripture: Mark 13:1-23

Before we proceed with Mark 13, I should like to make three points. First, I do not intend to engage in the debate about the end times — when, where, how, and so forth — which has been doing the rounds for ages, not only amongst Christian teachers but amongst the teachers of other beliefs as well. All of them have had their own agenda, and we are not greatly concerned with them here. In my own limited view, the prophecies of Jesus will be fulfilled in their entirety. One part of His prophecy was fulfilled in the first century itself; however, Jesus' predictions are not exhausted by that fulfilment. The first-century fulfilment of Mark 13, therefore, foreshadows a fulfilment of a greater sort, something that will happen in His own time. Second, I promise not to horrify you with gruesome, graphic descriptions of the happenings of the end time, as I did concerning our Lord's sufferings a few weeks ago. Third, we need to look back a little to Mark 11, which presented our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the events that followed it. In Mark 12 we saw a number of debates and events that gave us some insight into our Lord's teaching, and we shall see that, after His discourse about the end times in chapter 13, His journey towards Calvary continues.

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 each took their turn 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. Since Jesus was gaining popular support among the thousands of pilgrims in Jerusalem who had gathered to celebrate the Passover, the religious leaders of Israel decided to stop confronting Jesus in public, and instead hatched a plot to have Him arrested, tried, and executed. In the midst of all this, Jesus continued to prepare His disciples for what was soon to come — His death, His resurrection, and the events that would follow.

We now return to our series on the Gospel of Mark. We find, in chapter 13, the Olivet Discourse, so named because Jesus spoke these words while sitting upon the Mount of Olives, looking directly at the Jerusalem temple. This is an important and well-known section of the Gospel, and there is a great deal of interest and speculation about the end times in our own day and age. It is in these passages 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 every end-times view claims to be the view

Jesus taught His disciples here — though, ironically, most such views represent only partial or distorted versions of what our Lord actually predicted.

Before His death and resurrection, the disciples had a great deal of trouble making sense of our Lord's words. Indeed, the questions they put to Jesus, which serve as the occasion for His teaching about the course of the future, show how little they understood of what He was doing and saying. Understandably, the disciples were confused, and struggled to make sense of the difficult things Jesus had been teaching them, especially in the light of the surprising turn of events — the fierce opposition to Jesus by the religious establishment. How much they truly comprehended, or wished to believe, when Jesus had already on three occasions foretold His coming death and resurrection, is anybody's guess.

In Mark 13, we get to sit at the feet of our Lord Jesus as we too hear for ourselves what He had to say about the future. Every word uttered by our Lord had a clear purpose, a purpose that would take His hearers a step closer to doing His will.

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 are dispersed to the four corners of the earth, all as a result of the events of AD 70. He mixes together images of an immediate event, the destruction of the temple, with an event the disciples could not yet begin to understand, His Second Advent. This is what is sometimes called prophetic perspective, or double fulfilment.

"And as he went out of the temple, one of his disciples saith unto him, Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here! And Jesus answering said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Mark 13:1-2).

Herod the Great began to remodel and rebuild the temple years before Jesus was born; it had stood, by then, for nearly five hundred years, since the days of Ezra (Ezra 6:14-15). Herod made the temple one of the most beautiful buildings in Jerusalem, not in order to honour God, but to appease the Jews whom he ruled. The disciples were in awe of the temple and of everything it symbolised for first-century Jews. Mark tells us that they remarked, in particular, upon the temple's grandeur and the size of the stones with which it was built. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the temple was built of hard white stones, each about forty feet long, fifteen feet high, and twenty feet wide, all put in place without the aid of cranes or hydraulics — these huge stones were moved on wooden rollers, by block and tackle, an amazing feat of engineering.

Not only was the temple itself an architectural wonder, but this building was the heart and soul of Israel. It represented Israel's covenant with Yahweh; it was here that the sacrifices for sin were made and accepted, and it stood upon the very site where Abraham had offered to sacrifice his son Isaac. It also tied the people of Israel, in the present, back to the time of David and Solomon. The temple was the religious centre of Israel, as well as the capital of the nation — the one place where the whole of Israel's history and identity was centred. It would have been inconceivable to any Jew living at the time that this temple would, or even could, be destroyed. This building was the sign of God's blessing upon His covenant

people; 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.

We see how little Christ values outward pomp, where there is no real purity of heart. He looks with pity upon the ruin of precious souls, and weeps over them, but we do not find Him looking with pity upon the ruin of a fine building. Our Lord's words were fitted to His solemn mood. Little could all the solid strength of the very foundations of the world itself prevail against the thunderbolt of God. Moreover, it was a time when He felt most keenly the consecration, the approaching surrender, of His own life. In such an hour, no splendours distract the penetrating vision; the entire world is brief and frail and hollow to the man who has consciously given himself to God. It was the fitting moment at which to utter such a prophecy. Let us then be reminded how needful it is for us to have a more lasting abode in heaven, and to be prepared for it by the influence of the Holy Spirit, sought in the earnest use of all the means of grace.

Jesus also spoke of future events connected with His Second Coming, when He will judge all people. Some of His disciples lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70; this assured them, and it should assure us too, that everything else He predicted will also come to pass. Through these prophecies, Jesus warned His followers about the future so that they might learn how to live in the present, and this is a lesson for us also. Many of the predictions He made in this passage are yet to happen. The reason some of these are yet to happen is not to prevent us from guessing at the timeline, but to help us remain spiritually alert and prepared at all times as we wait for His return. There have been people in every religion, since Christ's resurrection, who have claimed to know exactly when Jesus would return; but we know that no one has yet been right, for Jesus will return according to His own timing, and not according to our timetables. Much guessing has centred upon the timeline, especially as the signs of which Jesus spoke have grown more apparent with the passing of time.

While Jesus refrained from disclosing a timeline, He spoke of the signs to look out for, before His Second Coming and His return to judge the world. Had this happened two thousand and ten years later, someone would have filed a Public Interest Litigation, someone else would have filed an application under the Right to Information Act, and yet someone else might even have gone to the Consumer Court for deficiency of service on the part of God! Though I say all that in a lighter vein, remember that you cannot bully Jesus. At the same time, Jesus could not have made these predictions in such detail, just before He went to the Cross, for no reason at all. Let us examine these signs in turn, and consider what they mean for us.

The first sign is that false messiahs will lead people astray. *"Take heed lest any man deceive you: for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many"* (Mark 13:5-6). We do not have to wonder whether a certain person is the Messiah, or whether these are the end times. When our Lord Jesus returns, we will know beyond doubt, because it will be evident to all true believers. If we know the Scriptures, we will know Jesus, and this knowledge is further deepened by our personal relationship with Him, through prayer and as we walk with Him in our daily lives.

History has proved how necessary such a warning is, for there are countless prophetic deceptions today, which have particularly multiplied in our own times. Many have already come claiming to be Christ, some of them not using this specific title, yet exalting themselves to a position that rightly belongs only

to our Lord Jesus Christ, and many have been deceived by them. To spot a counterfeit, study the real thing. We need to study the whole of the Word of God for ourselves, especially the Gospels, so that we are not taken in by an incomplete presentation of God's Word, one that affirms some things in the New Covenant while practically denying others. The Spirit of God will also warn us of error, if we love the truth; but many do not know the Spirit of God well enough, being fully entangled in the dynamics of this sinful world, and having given too little time to God. Most believers have yet to place Christ at the centre of their lives. It is time that we examine ourselves, and determine what course corrections are needed in our own lives; the need is urgent and inevitable. It is sometimes assumed by immature believers that if a teaching is accompanied by a spiritual sensation, it must be of God. This is a kind of cockeyed thinking: not all spiritual sensations come from God, nor are they all from the Holy Spirit.

Even in the first century, Paul warned of such false teachers in his epistles. The heresies and Gnosticism that arose troubled even the early believers. We need to be wary of groups who claim special knowledge, knowledge beyond the framework of the Bible, and we need to be bold in our total commitment, keeping our hearts and lives ready for our Lord's return.

The second sign is that fierce wars will take place. *"And when ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, be ye not troubled: for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom"* (Mark 13:7-8). Ezekiel shows us one of these major wars, in Ezekiel chapters 38 and 39, telling us that Russia, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and other Arab nations will attack Israel. News from Israel today gives us a glimpse of rumours of war, and the nations involved are the very nations of which Ezekiel warned us in chapter 38.

As a country, are we not always on tenterhooks over threats from across our borders, and over the possibility of the irresponsible deployment of nuclear arsenals? Are we not troubled by terror attacks and threats from home-grown terror outfits? Yet our Lord said that all these things would come to pass, but that the end was still not at hand. We need to cement our commitment to our Lord still further, and to exercise patience when these signs erupt all around us, for our Lord said that the end time is still to come.

The third sign is that natural disasters will occur. *"And there shall be earthquakes in divers places, and there shall be famines and troubles: these are the beginnings of sorrows"* (Mark 13:8). Revelation speaks of droughts, intense heat, and the lack of fresh water; Mark, Luke, and Matthew all speak likewise of famines and droughts in the last days. Consider what thousands of experts have discussed at Stockholm and, more recently, at Copenhagen: while global attention has focused on energy and food, these summits have also urgently discussed the key issues of water and global warming, sanitation in particular being one of the most pressing global concerns. European airspace was closed only recently because of a sudden formation of volcanic ash clouds. Christ warned of complex problems that would arise before His Second Coming, and this planet is, right now, facing major droughts, water shortages, energy concerns, and significant changes in climate. One study in the United Kingdom stated that, by 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living in regions of absolute water scarcity. Let us review what our Lord said would occur during the last generation: in Mark we read that when we see these signs, "these are the beginnings of sorrows." This generation is in the midst of those very birth pains right now. We are witnessing the birth pains of war, rumours of war, famine, drought, unpredictable weather, and intense

heat. At the end of all this, the new creation will take place, and all of us will stand in the presence of our Lord.

The fourth sign is that Christians will be persecuted for their testimony. *"But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them. And the gospel must first be published among all nations. But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost. Now the brother shall betray the brother to death, and the father the son; and children shall rise up against their parents, and shall cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved"* (Mark 13:9-13).

As the early Church began to grow, most of the disciples experienced the very persecution Jesus had spoken of. Since the time of Christ, Christians have been persecuted in their own countries and on the mission field. As a congregation removed from such happenings, we may consider ourselves safe from persecution for now, but our vision of God's Kingdom must not be limited by that narrow, local experience, to the neglect of what is happening to Christians elsewhere. A glance at the newspapers will show that many Christians, in other parts of our own country and of the world, face hardship and persecution daily.

Let us also remember that such persecution is an opportunity for Christians to witness for Christ — indeed, the very means by which those opposed to Him may be turned around. Persecution can be turned to advantage, in the service of God's desire that the gospel be proclaimed to everyone. The point is that, even if we are not overcomers when the Tribulation begins, we can, and must, become overcomers once it has started — for if we do not, like the foolish virgins of the parable, we shall very likely forfeit our salvation, since there seems to be no middle ground here. All Christians, at all times, are called to be witnesses for Christ. In this, Jesus was teaching us the attitude we should have whenever we must take a stand for the gospel. We need not be fearful or defensive about our faith, for the Holy Spirit will be present to give us the right words to say.

To be ready for the Tribulation means being ready to be courageous witnesses, and that means cultivating the habit of witnessing here and now. We should begin developing our skills in personal evangelism, learning and truly understanding the inner meaning of those passages of Scripture most useful for evangelism. We should learn the answers to the questions that unbelievers put to Christians, and how to communicate the basic doctrines of salvation simply and clearly. We should practise what might be called way-of-life witnessing, in which we witness, almost as a matter of course, to everyone with whom we have any ongoing contact. And we should pray for, and cultivate through practice, that spiritual quality the Scriptures call holy boldness, for we shall need a great deal of it during the Tribulation. My friends, the signs are written large before us. Are we ready to do our part, however small it may be, in fulfilling God's will?

The fifth sign is that a great tribulation will come upon the earth. Paul writes of this same sacrilege in his second letter to the Thessalonians: *"Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not*

come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4).

But let us remember: as the days grow darker, and things grow worse upon this planet, our glorious homegoing to Paradise draws closer and closer. Let us remain faithful to the Lord Jesus, for exciting and wonderful days await us (1 Corinthians 2:9; Revelation 21:4; Philippians 1:20-23; Hebrews 3:14, and others).

Jesus says, in verse 17, "But woe to them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!" Some Christian couples contemplating starting a family have been discouraged by this verse, wondering whether children ought to be brought into a world so filled with sin, evil, and terror. But Jesus was not issuing a general warning against pregnancy and childbirth. History has always held its risks and drawbacks; no time or place has ever been perfect. We must remember that God will look after the welfare of our children, just as He has looked after us.

And can Christians be deceived? The answer, quite simply, is yes. So convincing will be the arguments and proofs offered by deceivers in the end times that it will be difficult not to fall away from Christ. Yet if we are prepared, Jesus assures us, we can remain faithful. To see through the disguises of false teachers, we might ask ourselves a few questions. Have their predictions ever come true, or must they be constantly revised to fit what has already happened? Does the teaching make use of some small section of the Bible while neglecting the whole? Does it contradict what the Bible says about God? Are its practices designed to glorify the teacher rather than Christ? And does it promote hostility towards other Christians? Honest answers to these questions will warn us away from such false teachers.

Never forget that the One who spoke of the future, our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, 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 very day; but if not, let us not lose heart, but rejoice, and be prepared, for He will come again. He has promised, and His promises cannot fail.

Amen.