

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ “But in those days after that tribulation the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ And then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in the clouds’ with great power and glory, ²⁷ and then he will send out the angels and gather (his) elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky. ²⁸ “Learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that he is near, at the gates. ³⁰ Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³² “But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵ Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. ³⁶ May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”



Image credit: *Flevit super illam* (He wept over it) | Enrique Simonet, 1892 | Museo del Prado, Madrid | PD-US

Context

In Liturgical Year B, the first reading of the year, the 1st Sunday in Advent is [Mark 13:32-37](#). The reading, in part, appears again at the end of the liturgical cycle of Year B – here on the 33rd Sunday when we proclaim [Mark 13:24-34](#).

Our gospel reading is the end piece of the larger “Olivet Discourse” in Mark 13:1-37. In the Gospel of Mark there is no passage more problematic than the prophetic discourse of Jesus on the destruction of the Temple. The questions posed by the form and content of the chapter and by its relationship to the Gospel as a whole are complex and difficult and have been the occasion of extensive scholarship and literature. The Olivet discourse is unique as the longest uninterrupted course of private instruction

recorded by Mark. Moreover, it is the only extended speech attributed to Jesus by the evangelist. The interpretation of Mark 13 is inevitably colored by critical decisions concerning a whole range of factors.

William Lane outlines Mark 13 as follows:

- Jesus' Prophecy of Impending Destruction. (vv. 1–4)
- Warning Against Deception. (vv. 5–8)
- A Call to Steadfastness Under Persecution. (vv. 9–13)
- The Appalling Sacrilege and the Necessity for Flight. (vv. 14–23)
- The Triumph of the Son of Man. (vv. 24–27)
- The Lesson of the Fig Tree. (vv. 28–31)
- The Call to Vigilance. (vv. 32–37)

The Olivet discourse occupies a special position in the overall Marcan flow of the gospel. It provides the bridge between Jesus' public ministry, culminating in the conflict with the Temple authorities (11:11–12:12), and the Passion Narrative, where the conflict with authority is the occasion of Jesus' condemnation and death (Mark 14). By locating the eschatological discourse at this juncture of the story, Mark highlights the relationship which exists between the judgment upon Jerusalem implied by the discourse and the death of Jesus. This can be seen in verses 5–37 where Jesus' words are a farewell address providing instruction and consolation for his disciples just prior to his death. Chapter 13 unites prophecy concerning the future with exhortation regulating the conduct of the disciples in the period when the Master will no longer be with them..

The primary function of Mark 13 is not to disclose secretive information but to promote faith and obedience in a time of distress and upheaval. With profound pastoral concern, Jesus prepared his disciples and the Church for a future period which would entail both persecution and mission. The discourse clearly presupposes a period of historical development between the resurrection and the parousia. The relationship of the necessity of suffering to the experience of vindication and glory established in 8:34–38 (right after Peter's confession and the first passion prediction) is stressed once again by the announcement of the manifestation in glory of the Son of Man in the context of suffering for the people of God.

This message was of profound significance for the Christians of Rome, harassed by persecution and disturbed by the rumors of the developments in Palestine in the sixties. The inclusion of the end-times discourse in the Gospel was motivated by the same pastoral concern that had prompted Jesus' teaching throughout the gospel. Mark cautions his readers that the community is to find its authentic discipleship, not in apocalyptic fervor but in obedience to Jesus' call to cross-bearing and evangelism, but in the confidence that this is the will of God which must be fulfilled before the parousia. Jesus' words provided a bed-rock for Christian hope. The witness of the believing community is not only witness to the suffering Son of Man whose crucifixion and resurrection comprise the core of the gospel but also looks forward to the triumphant Son of Man whose appearance represents the one event in light of which the present is illumined. This fact enabled Mark and the Roman community to face their own crisis of the sixties with realism and hope.

There is always a group, already predisposed to end-times analysis, who seem to think that "*no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*" does not apply to them – and given enough study they can know the end times and/or the second coming. Witherington [338] offers that "one must see this discourse as the final example of the sort of private explanation and inside information Jesus gave his disciples. One of its rhetorical goals is to get the disciples to focus less on the things that will happen and more on the one who will bring all things to a conclusion in due course – the Son of Man."

Commentary

Promise Amidst Tribulation. ²⁴ “*But in those days after that tribulation the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,* ²⁵ *and the stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.* ²⁶ *And then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in the clouds’ with great power and glory,* ²⁷ *and then he will send out the angels and gather (his) elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky.*”

As noted in most outlines, we are jumping into the middle of Mark’s “Olivet Discourse.” Pheme Perkins [691] nicely locates it for us: “Both of the previous sections end with a note of warning to the elect: Persecution requires endurance (v. 13); the presence of false messiahs requires careful attention to the prophecies in the discourse (v. 23). Both sections also assure the faithful that they will be among the elect (vv. 13*b*, 20*b*). Thus each unit of prophetic discourse directs the reader’s attention from the present or impending historical experiences of persecution to the culmination of all things at the end time. The faithful testimony of Jesus’ disciples before human courts will assure them that the Son of Man will testify on their behalf in the heavenly court (13:9–13 echoes 8:34–38). A prophecy concerning the coming of the Son of Man to gather the elect now makes explicit the expectations built up in the previous sections.”

The opening verse of this Gospel could not offer words more closely associated with the “end time” so popularized in modern Christian fiction (e.g., the “Left Behind” series). Mark borrows these images from Old Testament prophet Daniel (Dan 7). But these same images are also found throughout the prophets (Isa 13:10; 34:4; Ezek 32:7–8; Joel 2:10–11; 3:4, 15), where a divine theophany causes the turmoil in nature. As Stoffregen notes “such phenomena have always been with us: solar and lunar eclipses, falling stars, booming thunder, etc. The time to prepare for the end has always been in the present time.” He notes that later in the discourse (vv.33,35), the imperatives: *be watchful*, *be alert* (*blepete*; *agrypneite*), and *Watch* (*grygoreite*) are present tense in a form that implies current and on-going action.

And while the discourse holds up somewhat terrifying images, what is promised is that the Son of Man will come, together with the elect, from the ends of the Earth. His ascent to the divine throne marks the end of the war being waged by the fourth beast against the “holy ones.” God gives judgment on their behalf and bestows an everlasting dominion upon them (Dan 7:18, 26–27)

The ingathering is described as *gather (his) elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky*. William Lane [476-477] notes that there are likely very distinct messages being delivered by each description (four winds, end of the earth, end of the sky): “The first describes the loss of national unity by the elect people as a consequence of their infidelity to God; the second announces the salvation of Israel through a return to spiritual and national unity. The regathering of dispersed Israel is an essential and traditional theme of Jewish eschatological hope (e.g. Tobit 14:7, “all the children of Israel that are delivered in those days, remembering God in truth, shall be gathered together ...”; cf. Psalms of Solomon 17:28). When Jesus touched upon this theme in the context of the eschatological discourse he reinterpreted Israel’s hope in a profound way. Until that time the Temple of Jerusalem had been the visible center for the gathering of the scattered chosen people. The destruction of the Temple, however, would not result in their permanent dispersment. On the contrary, it will be followed by the regathering of the new people of God around the Son of Man, that is, around Jesus. The counterpart to the destruction of Jerusalem and the sanctuary is the eschatological salvation of the elect. The remnant of Israel will recover their lost unity through Jesus, the triumphant Son of Man. To be gathered by the Son of Man is to participate in the eschatological community and to experience the messianic blessing.”

The Certain Sign. ²⁸ *“Learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that he is near, at the gates. ³⁰ Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

The image of the fig tree in blossom is a sure and certain sign of summer. Jesus is using a short proverb to assure the readings that his promises are true. So, when they *see these things happening* they will know. But what are “*these things*”? Is the reader supposed to remember the fig tree with leaves and no fruit, which Jesus cursed (11:12–14, 20–22)? If so, then alleged “signs” must be carefully considered. “...*know that he is near.*” Who is “near”? God? A Son of Man other than Jesus? Jesus as Son of Man? What are “these things”?

At the very beginning of Mark 13, immediately following upon last week’s Gospel (the Markan version of the Widow’s mite), we read:

¹ As he was making his way out of the temple area one of his disciples said to him, “Look, teacher, what stones and what buildings!” ² Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be one stone left upon another that will not be thrown down.” ³ As he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple area, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will this happen, and what sign will there be when all these things are about to come to an end?”

The verses above (vv.24-27) referred to the second coming, not the 70 AD destruction of the Temple. While it is possible the signs of vv.21-24 are coterminous with the destruction of the Temple hinted at v.2, there may be another possibility:

¹⁴ “When you see the desolating abomination standing where he should not (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, ¹⁵ (and) a person on a housetop must not go down or enter to get anything out of his house, ¹⁶ and a person in a field must not return to get his cloak. ¹⁷ Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days. ¹⁸ Pray that this does not happen in winter. ¹⁹ For those times will have tribulation such as has not been since the beginning of God’s creation until now, nor ever will be. ²⁰ If the Lord had not shortened those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect whom he chose, he did shorten the days. ²¹ If anyone says to you then, ‘Look, here is the Messiah! Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. ²² False messiahs and false prophets will arise and will perform signs and wonders in order to mislead, if that were possible, the elect. ²³ Be watchful! I have told it all to you beforehand. (Mark 13:24-23)

The problem that presents itself is that it is possible in Mark (definite in Luke and Matthew) that the 70 AD destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was already a historical fact – and yet the Son of Man did not literally come again – and yet He has ascended his throne in heaven. It is not clear what is being said. Perkins [693] offers that “The earlier sections of the chapter appear to distance the destruction of the Temple and turmoil surrounding the Temple from the end time. The saying about the fig tree may have been intended by Mark to convey reassurance rather than information; as Christians begin to see events that conform to these predictions, they are assured that the day of salvation for the elect is near.”

Chad Myers (*Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*) agrees with most commentators that Mark was written during the Jewish revolt against Rome (66-70 AD), but, in addition, that Mark is encouraging his community not to participate in the rebel's revolt. The "false prophets" are those zealots who claim that their victory over Rome will usher in the new age. For Mark, the war is not a sign of the end, but only of the beginning. Myers [330] writes concerning the opening of ch. 13:

The fact that the parties of the revolt are never mentioned by name in the Gospel may indicate that Mark felt deeply sympathetic to their protest against the social, political, and economic oppression of the Romans. On the other hand, the fact that Mark feels a need to reject the claims of the rebel recruiters suggests that members of Mark's community may well have already been drafted into the liberation war, or were sorely tempted to join. Who could resist the pull of patriotism, or the lure of the hope that here at last was the long-deferred prophetic promise of that final battle in which Yahweh would vindicate Israel? In such a moment, there was only one voice that could match the persuasive call of the rebel recruiters: Jesus the living teacher. So to this Jesus the disciples turn in a direct plea for clarity on the meaning of the historical moment.

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple did indeed happen as noted in v.30: “*Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.*” The events of 70 AD were not the harbinger of the Second Coming/*parousia*, but it was a harbinger of the community of Christian Jews soon taking on an identity of Christian with its roots in Judaism and its eyes on Christ.

Keeping Watch. ³² “*But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*” ³³ *Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come.* ³⁴ *It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch.* ³⁵ *Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning.* ³⁶ *May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.* ³⁷ *What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”*

Here at the end of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus’ primary message is not about signs or their interpretations, but maintaining vigilance – the watchfulness that is imperative, because *no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*. No one knows which day will be *that day*, a phrase with clear eschatological resonance in passages which announce the day of Yahweh’s appearing (Amos 8:3, 9, 13; 9:11; Mic. 4:6; 5:9; 7:11; Zeph. 1:9f.; 3:11, 16; Obad. 8; Joel 3:18; Zech. 9:16; 12–14). As previously noted by Witherington [338], Jesus’ goal has been to get the disciples to focus less on the things that will happen and more on the one who will bring all things to a conclusion in due course – the Son of Man.

One of the phrases that has garnered attention in every age is “*nor the Son.*” Seemingly, there is a clear indication and confession of ignorance about the events at the end of the age. At one level it is the same mystery one faces when plumbing the Incarnation, that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. The history of heresy is filled with attempts of people to explain how there can be a divide between the human and divine concerning such things. But I would suggest in this passage, there is no theological or Christological intention on Jesus’ part. It is a warning that what is needed is vigilance not calculation. If the ever-vigilant angels will not have a “playbook of signs,” it makes no sense for humans to prepare the checklist of signs. Not that generation after generation have not tried. The only common trait is that they are always wrong.

That day is impossible to discern and so to prepare oneself for it. In this respect it stands in sharp contrast to the destruction of Jerusalem, which could be clearly foreseen and its devastation avoided by flight. The day of judgment will arrive so suddenly and unexpectedly that absolutely no one will have the least warning. That is why vigilance and confident faith are required of the disciples and the Church. Correctly understood, the qualification “*nor the Son*” indicates that even Jesus had to live by faith and to make obedience and watchfulness the hallmark of his ministry.

Jesus recognized one exception to the true ignorance implied: “*except the Father.*” The one certainty the disciples may have is that the day will come when God will execute his decision to judge the world, and for that purpose he will send forth his Son with the hosts of angels (Ch. 8:38; 13:26f.). The

parousia and the judgment it will inaugurate are matters irrevocably decided. From this perspective the parousia is not conditioned by any other consideration than the sovereign decision of the Father, which remains enveloped with impenetrable mystery.

The exhortations to vigilance which follow are linked to the fact that the critical moment remains unknowable. The connection with v. 32 and with the brief parable which follows is underlined by reference to an ignorance of God's secret counsel:

- v. 32 *"But of that day or hour, no one knows*
- v. 33 *"You do not know when the time will come."*
- v. 35 *"you do not know when the lord of the house is coming."*

In the parallelism that is developed, *"that day or hour,"* the critical moment, and the moment of the householder's return are identical expressions for the same reality: the mysterious moment of divine intervention, which cannot be foreseen. Because the moment of crisis is unknowable, unceasing vigilance is imperative. The time of the appearance of the Son of Man in glory is unknown, but the fact that he will come is certain. The Church is called to live vigilantly in the certainty of that coming.

Final Reflection

PHEME PERKINS [694] offers a final thought

"On the one hand, Mark underscores the certainty of Jesus' word. Readers know that the death of Jesus on the cross does not end the story of salvation. On the other hand, Christians need not concern themselves with apocalyptic speculation. Disciples should remember that 'doing the will of God' (3:35) has no relationship to the timing of divine judgment. Neither should Christians concern themselves with the fate of those who persecute them or who reject the gospel. When Christians rush to judge others, they should remember this exhortation. The only question the master will ask is whether the servants have been faithful to their call as disciples.

"Living some two millennia after these words were spoken, many Christians today assume that the word about watchfulness has no significance for them. Yet we all know that human life is fleeting. A young man was murdered on the streets of a large city merely for asking some youths why they were verbally tormenting an elderly man. The young man's fiancée discovers that her whole world has dissolved. Fortunately, the last words they had exchanged concerned love and their hopes for the future. A young woman went to pick up her infant from his nap and discovered that he had died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Unfortunately, V 8, p 695 her last interaction with the baby had been one of anger and frustration over the child's fussing and crying. Both women are in terrible pain. They have been stripped of what they love most in the whole world. But the young mother has to face the nagging regret that she did not show her baby the love she feels for him in the last hours she spent with him. On a personal level, such stories remind us that we should be watchful as Christians. The early religious orders practiced a time of examining one's conscience, in which all members assessed how their behavior of the day just past reflected (or neglected) the conduct expected of members of their order. Being a faithful Christian does not just 'happen' like crabgrass or dandelions popping up in the lawn. It requires the care, attention, and cultivation of an expert gardener."

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