

Apocalypse Now: Mark 13

Series: Following Jesus: Studies in Mark's Gospel

Date: 10 April 2022; Palm Sunday

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Mark 13

Does anyone know what this is? (For readers, imagine, if you will, 2 small wooden blocks intersecting at right angles with a wooden ring around them)

One of those clever and tricky wood puzzles. The goal is to get the wooden ring off. The idea is you have to work out how the two pieces of wood are held together, then how to reverse the holding mechanism so you can pull them apart and slip the ring off. I know how it works, but it still takes me ages to get it apart.

Sometimes when we come to a passage in the Bible it feels a bit like one of these puzzles. You don't know where to start to unravel the mystery and so you sit there looking at it from different angles, scratching your head and trying to work out how on earth it works. You might have felt like that as we read through Mark 13. What on earth is it talking about? How are we to understand it? There are a number of different ways people read this passage or that you may have heard in the past. We'll look at a few of them. But even if we don't settle on every bit of its meaning, there are some important things that we can take home from this passage. And these are vital to what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus. We're looking at this chapter today because we looked at the triumphal entry a couple of weeks ago, and unfortunately there aren't enough church services between Palm Sunday and Good Friday for you to come and hear sermons on chapters 11-13 of Mark.

What's in Mark 13 for you today if you're not a Christian? Maybe you'll get an insight into how Christians can disagree about important stuff and still get along. But second, like the rest of the Bible, this is a passage that puts the question to us: how do I read the signs of the times? What is my hope for the future? What does the Christian teaching that Jesus will bring in the Kingdom of God mean?

Are you ready? Strap on your seatbelt as we dive in.

1. What is this passage talking about?

The first question we can ask is: What **is this passage talking about**?

You might be surprised at this, but one of the tricks when it comes to understanding any text is to read what it says. If you have a look at verses 1-4 you can see that Jesus says the temple will be destroyed. The disciples ask him when this will happen. The rest of the chapter is Jesus' answer to that question.

(1) So the first thing to say about what Jesus is talking about is that he is talking about the destruction of the temple.

In verse 14 Jesus uses apocalyptic language to refer to the temple when he speaks about "the abomination that causes desolation". This phrase is taken from Daniel 8.13 and primarily referred to 167BC when the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes captured Jerusalem and dedicated the temple to Zeus Olympias by sacrificing pigs on the altar. Jesus is saying that something equally distressing will happen to the temple in the future.

(2) The second big thing Jesus is talking about comes in verse 26.

At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. This again is a picture lifted from the prophet Daniel, this time 7.13-14 which read:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. **14** He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man throughout Mark's gospel. In 10.45 Jesus said that *the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many*. Humble service has been Jesus' mode of operation. But here in chapter 13 he says there will be a day when he comes in power and glory, to fully embody the picture of Daniel 7.

2. When will these things happen?

As readers we share the next question with the disciples - **When will these things happen?** At this point there are 2 main options that people go for, and, just to complicate things, I'm going to suggest a third.

(1) Option 1. The second coming of Christ.

This may be the one that you're most familiar with. Every time we say the creed we say we believe that this event will happen - *he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end*.

Sounds a lot like Daniel 7 and Mark 13.26.

There are a number of things in the text that lend themselves to this reading.

There is the promise of international conflict and natural disasters in 7-8. There is the promise of persecution for those who follow Christ in 9-13. There is the promise that there will be false prophets and false Messiahs in 6, 21 and 22. There is the promise that the gospel will be preached to all the nations, verse 10. And there is the picture of cosmic upheaval in verses 24-25. All this before the coming of Christ in glory in verse 26. And then the picture of him gathering his chosen people from all across the earth, an image that perhaps resonates with 1 Thessalonians 4.16-17.

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. **17** After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

On this reading the text primarily focuses on the second coming of Christ. The destruction of the temple fades into the background or is somehow an event yet to come - which suggests it needs to be rebuilt.

(2) Option 2 - The Ascension of Christ and the destruction of the Temple in AD70.

This may be less familiar to you, but it's one held perhaps by the majority of scholars. Again there are a number of points that suggest this reading in the text.

First, and very clearly, this option has front and centre the destruction of the temple which is the subject that kicks off the whole chapter. In AD70 Roman forces under Titus captured Jerusalem and razed the temple to the ground. You can still see the arch built to celebrate his victory in Rome. Luke's account of this chapter makes this more clear as Jesus warns about fleeing Jerusalem when you see it being surrounded by armies. Matthew adds the phrase "where there is a carcass, there the vultures

will gather”¹, which is taken to refer to the eagles of the standards of Roman armies. The 4th century historian Eusebius records the Jerusalem church heeding Jesus’ words in verse 14, to flee to mountains. On the approach of Titus’ army they fled to Pella across the Jordan and so survived.² Verse 17 found particularly gruesome fulfilment. The historian Josephus, an eyewitness, records that those besieged in the city ate their own babies to survive.

This was a catastrophic event for the people of Israel. In light of many of Jesus’ warnings to the leaders of Israel it can be seen as a final act of judgement upon her for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. The temple was seen by the Jews as being at the centre of creation. The cosmic language that Jesus uses in verses 24-25, quoting Isaiah, reflects the cosmic significance of the temple’s destruction. The world, as it were, was coming to an end.

The coming of the Son of Man in the clouds with great power and glory, on this reading, speak not about the second coming of Christ from heaven to earth, but of the coming of Christ from earth to heaven - like the Son of Man approaching the ancient of days (that is God), in Daniel 7, and being given power and authority. On this reading, Jesus’ words refer to his resurrection and his ascension to the right hand of the Father. Finally, option 2 fits with Jesus’ words in verse 30, that *this* generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

(3) Option 3 - The death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

This is a minority view, but not without its merits. In terms of the storyline of Mark’s gospel, this chapter is the prelude to the passion narrative. And there are a bunch of connections between the two. Jesus is put on trial before a king and a governor. He’s flogged. The key charge is that he will destroy the temple and rebuild it in 3 days. What could be more sacrilegious than crucifying the one who is God come in the flesh? Like verse 24 the sun is darkened at Jesus’ death. Jesus quotes Daniel 7 again in his trial before the high priest. The timing in verse 35 - evening, midnight, when the rooster crows and at dawn, seems to mirror the timing of the events that unfold in chapter 14 - the last supper, Jesus’ arrest, Peter’s denial, his being handed over to Pilate. And there is even a young man who follows Jesus’ advice in verse 16 and flees naked into the night, leaving his cloak behind.

So, just to recap. Mark 13 is about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the coming of Jesus in power and glory. We’ve looked at 3 options for when these things will happen: One in the future - when Jesus comes again; and 2 in the past - either Jesus’ ascension and then the destruction of the temple in AD70, or Jesus’ own death, resurrection and ascension. To be honest I’m still trying to work out which option best fits the text. It may be that Jesus’ words here have all 3 in mind, and the chapter has a foreshortened perspective where different things which are distant in time are placed side by side. But I don’t think we need to nail down the “right” interpretation to be able to get some vital take homes from this passage.

There are 5 things for us to take away from this passage.

1. No one knows the day or the hour.

Jesus’ answer to *when* may not be clear, but what he is crystal clear about is that the only person who does know when is the Father. At the very least this is true for the day of his return. You may recall a few years back there was a big hoo-ha about a Mayan calendar predicted date for the end of the

¹ 24.28

² Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.5.3

world. And then there was Y2K before that. And before that - you get the picture. Jesus' point here is really clear. You don't need to get caught up in all that because even he doesn't know the date of his return. And that means if someone does predict the date, you don't need to listen to them. Full stop. End of story. Not just on this, but on any so-called prophecy or prediction, because they have contradicted Jesus' words.

2. False prophets and Messiahs

This leads into the second take home, and that is that there have been and will continue to be false prophets and false Messiahs. Once again Jesus' point is really clear. Watch out! Be on your guard. Don't get taken in. Don't let them deceive you. False Messiahs are a bit easier to spot. In Matthew Jesus says, "as lighting that comes from the east is visible from the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man."³ When Jesus returns - no one will miss it. Everyone will know, at the same time. So when someone like Sun Myung Moon from the Moonies or Unification Church claims he is Jesus come again, don't believe a word of it! We're also called to be discerning when it comes to those claiming to speak in Christ's name, particularly if they make pronouncements about the future. Similarly, people who attempt to read world events as the fulfilment of specific prophecies and the countdown to the end are barking up the wrong tree. As always, the Bible is our standard and guide here. And the fundamental way to interpret Scripture is through Scripture. That is, we let the Bible interpret itself as we read the parts in relation to each other and the whole. The way to read Biblical prophecy is to interpret it through Scripture not the newspaper.

3. The destruction of the temple signals the end of the Old covenant and the death and resurrection of Jesus the beginning of the new. The destruction of the temple was God's judgement on Israel and its leaders. The people of God are no longer Israel, but all those who have faith in Christ, both Jew and Gentile. As such we don't need to look for the rebuilding of the temple or the restoration of Israel as a political entity.

4. We should expect persecution.

"Everyone will hate you because of me," Jesus says.⁴ We ought not be surprised when we experience opposition or push back simply for being followers of Christ. That's not an excuse to be a jerk. But it is something we can expect.

5. Finally, Jesus says, **Keep watch for you do not know when the owner of the house will come back.**⁵ If you're going to take one thing away from this passage it is this - Jesus will one day return. You can't know when. So watch out. Stay awake! Be ready! Your whole life lived in his sight. He could return at any moment. And how will he find you? What will he find you doing? As followers of Christ we're servants of the king. We belong to the day, and not the night. We live expectantly for that day when he will return. Watching is to be the basic orientation of our lives. Are you ready? Are you looking forward to that day?

³ Matthew 24:27

⁴ Mark 13:13

⁵ Mark 13.35