



Sermon Transcript

March 18, 2018

Gospel of Mark: The Good News of Jesus

Stay Awake!

Mark 13:1-37

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 18, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text: Mark 13:1-37

¹ And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” ² And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

³ And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?” ⁵ And Jesus began to say to them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷ And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

⁹ “But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. ¹⁰ And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.

¹¹ And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. ¹² And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. ¹³ And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

¹⁴ “But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁵ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, ¹⁶ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁷ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ¹⁸ Pray that it may not happen in winter. ¹⁹ For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. ²⁰ And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. ²¹ And then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. ²² For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. ²³ But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.

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 heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in 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 ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. ³⁵ Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

Introduction

You know you are in for a challenge when you go to study for your sermon and the very first thing you read in the commentary is this: “In the Gospel of Mark there is no passage more problematic than the prophetic discourse of Jesus on the destruction of the Temple.”¹ Kent Hughes shared the same sentiment when he said of Mark 13 that it is “by far the most difficult passage in Mark and . . . one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament . . . The fact is, we have yet to find a scholar who can perfectly unravel the knotty problems of the Olivet Discourse.”² And here we are.

Strangely, I find these statements to be both intimidating, and at the same time, freeing. It is intimidating to try to “unravel the knotty problems” that others far brighter than myself have been unable to untie. And yet, at the same time, it is a bit freeing to know that you can let some questions remain unanswered because they just seem to be a bit too perplexing. It is alright to have unanswered questions about Mark 13.

I think there are two reasons why this passage is so perplexing. First of all, the issue that

is driving this passage is the announcement Jesus makes in verse 2. After the disciples were admiring the grandeur of the Temple, Jesus made a sobering pronouncement about the Temple. Considered one of the great wonders of the Roman world, Jesus said the Temple was going to be destroyed. When he says the Temple is going to be destroyed, we are not talking about it coming under disrepair, or a broken window here, a hole in the roof or a door unhinged over there. Instead, he is talking about the utter destruction of the Temple. Jesus said of this magnificent structure, *“There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”*

After hearing this statement, the disciples wanted to know when all this will happen. They ask Jesus in verse 4, *“When will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”* In responding to their question, Jesus gives them a sign that points to that day when the Temple will be destroyed. Now here is the challenge. As Jesus is responding to their question about the destruction of the Temple, he also makes some comments about the second coming of Christ. So one of the challenges you have as you read through his response to the question from the disciples is to clarify when he is talking about the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD and when he is talking about the second coming of Christ, which is yet to come.

This is one of the knots that are important to unravel and I feel as though I have untangled them somewhat in my own mind. I think Jesus is primarily talking about the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD in verses 3-23 and then in verse 24-27 he switches gears and talks about the second coming of Christ. Then starting in verse 28, Jesus shares some parables. The first parable, the parable of the fig tree, is about the destruction of the Temple. He concludes this parable in verse 30 by saying, *“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”* In other words, the destruction of the Temple will happen in the lifetime of their generation. But then in verses 32-37, we are back to talking about the second coming of Jesus and it is described as a “day and hour that no one knows.” Unlike the destruction of the Temple, there is no sign to be given. Jesus could come back at any moment and at any time.

This is the second reason this passage can be so confusing. When it comes to matters like “the end times” so many people have preconceived notions of how it is all going to shake out in the end. Here is the problem. If you come with your system to the text, you often are found trying to make the text fit into your system. You might be Pre-trib, Mid-trib or Post-trib. You might be Pre-mil, A-mil or Post-mil. You might be a Preterist, whether mild or extreme or somewhere in between. (You might have no clue about any of these labels.) They are all schools of thought about the sequence of events in the end

times. Here is the reality. Every view has holes in them. Consequently, I am trying hard to keep my finger on the text and to not bring some preconceived system into the text. Let the text speak for itself. Besides, the variety of opinion on how it will all shake out in the end tells me that it is not as clear as some may like to think. And furthermore, the purpose for telling us about the second coming of Christ is not so that we can fill up our charts with what will happen next. Rather, these words are given to us to warn us to “stay awake.” In fact, there are seventeen imperatives in this chapter. This tells us that Jesus is not just giving us information to satisfy our curiosity. Rather these seventeen commands imply that this teaching on the return of Jesus is something that ought to move us to action. Several times you are going to hear Jesus command this morning, “*Be on your guard.*” “*Stay awake.*” Why? You don’t know when Jesus is coming back. So we are encouraged to be ready in case that day is . . . today.

Here is the discovery I made this week. In the midst of the perplexities of this passage, there are some very clear messages that come through loud and clear. While there will still be some lingering questions and possibly even some disagreement in understanding between us, there is no doubt in my mind about the main points Jesus is making here. I will give you those main points right now.

- If you are going to follow Jesus, expect tribulation and persecution.
- Jesus is coming back and when he comes back he is coming to judge.
- We are to live as though Jesus is coming back today. Jesus says, “*stay awake!*”

Set the Scene

Before we look at the response of Jesus to the questions posed by Peter, James, John and Andrew, let me share a little more background information with you. First of all, we noted last week that Mark 11-13 all go together. They describe for us the events of Jesus in the first part of the week between what we call Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. It begins with Jesus riding into Jerusalem and the people are lining the street singing his praises and recognizing him to be Israel’s promised Messiah. But again, they don’t understand that Jesus came to die on the cross.

So once Jesus arrives into Jerusalem, we saw last week that he took the posture of a prophet. Through cursing the fig tree, overturning the money changers in the Temple and confronting the religious leaders with the parable of the Tenants and the Vineyard, Jesus was pronouncing judgment on the leaders of Israel for failing to repent of their sin and for failing to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah. And so Jesus says in Mark 12:9 at the conclusion of the parable of the Tenants, “*What will the owner of the vineyard do?*”

He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.” And we discover in Mark 12:12 that the religious leaders got “the punch line” of the parable and so they doubled down on their efforts to arrest Jesus because they “*perceived that he had told the parable against them.*”

So when we come to Mark 13, we are riding on the coattails of Mark 11-12. Mark 13 is the crescendo of this prophetic pronouncement of judgment against Jerusalem and her leaders for their rejection of Jesus, the Messiah. And so Jesus says the unthinkable in Mark 13:2, “*Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.*”

That is quite a bold statement considering the size of the Temple built by King Herod. Josephus, the Jewish historian of that time period, said of the Temple, “To approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white. Some of the stones in the building were forty-five cubits in length, five in height and six in breadth.”³ Forty-five cubits in length would be equal to 67 feet long. That is the size of a stone that makes up this building. So when Jesus talks about “*one stone upon another*” being thrown down, is he being literal here or figurative? With stones that big, that would be quite an undertaking.

Josephus tells us that when Titus invaded Jerusalem in 70 AD, it was his original intent to preserve the Temple. But the Temple was gutted by a fire set by one of his soldiers. And so Titus ordered that the whole city and the Temple be razed to the ground. So the Temple was dismantled one stone at a time, partly to reclaim all the gold that was part of this massive structure.⁴ As we often come to find in our understanding of Scripture, God’s words are trustworthy and true. It happened just as Jesus said it would.

So Mark 13 begins with Jesus and the disciples walking out of the Temple. The disciples are marveling at the grandeur of the Temple. Then Jesus informs them that it is coming down. That was the last time Jesus set foot in the Temple. They walked out of the city and up onto the Mount of Olives. From the Mount of Olives, they are able to look down on Jerusalem and the magnificent Temple. Pondering these words from Jesus, Peter, James, John and Andrew—the first four disciples to follow Jesus—want to know when all of this will happen and what will clue them in that this will become a reality.

Tribulation Will Come

I am intrigued by how Jesus initially responds to the questions of these four disciples. He

doesn't begin by giving them a sign as to when this prophecy will be fulfilled. He'll get to that "sign" in verses 14-23. But, rather, he begins by telling them "what is not a sign." I think these words are helpful to us as we await the second coming of Christ.

In his initial response to his disciples, Jesus is cautioning them from reading too much into current events and drawing the conclusion that the end must be near. He starts with wars and natural disasters. In verse 5-8 he tells them not be alarmed when they hear of "*wars and rumors of wars*" and when natural disasters like earthquakes and famines take place. He said, "*These are but the beginning of the birth pains.*"

It is interesting to me how people take current events, like natural disasters and wars, and come to the conclusion that the end must be near. They come to this conclusion because they are under the impression that it has never been this bad before. But from the time of Jesus to the present, these things have been a constant reality. In their book *The Lessons of History*, Will and Ariel Durant concluded that "War is one of the constants of history, and has not diminished with civilization or democracy. In the last 3,421 years of recorded history only 268 have seen no war."⁵ It is the same with what we call natural disasters. During the years between the time of Christ and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, there was an earthquake in Laodicea, the volcano Vesuvius erupted and entombed the people of Pompeii, and there was a famine in Rome. In his commentary on Mark, Gundry writes, "What Jesus calls *the beginning of birth pains* will embrace him and covers the entirety of the period during which his disciples bear witness, suffer persecution, and stand in danger of deception however long or short that period may turn out to be."⁶ We just don't know how long "labor will last."

Then in verses 9-13, Jesus tells them that they will be persecuted for their identification as followers of Jesus. He says, "*But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. . . And brother will deliver brother over to death . . . And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*" Again, I don't think Jesus is saying that persecution is a sign of the end. Rather, I think he is saying that this going to be norm for those who follow Jesus and don't just think that because you are being persecuted that "the end" is right around the corner. This is the norm. Tribulation and suffering for the church and the follower of Christ will be the primary tone between the first and second advent of Christ.

Here is the problem with the church in America. We think the end must be right around the corner because for the first time in American history, it is costing us

something to follow Jesus. We think, the end must be near, because we have never had it so bad. Well go to the persecuted church around the world and compare notes and come back and tell me “how bad” we really have it. And furthermore, any persecution we may suffer in the days ahead may bring a necessary corrective to the church and our faith. I was staggered by a quote I read in preparing for this sermon. Timothy Geddert said, “Mark’s theology of the advancing kingdom is much more like a relay race in which persecution for the sake of the Gospel is the baton passed on from each runner to the next as they take their round on the track.” (If the baton being passed from generation to generation of disciples is persecution, I wonder how willing the American church is to reach back and grab it.) Geddert continues, “Or (stick closer to Mark’s imagery), it is the cross passed on from shoulder to shoulder as new recruits travel the “way” from Galilee to Jerusalem.”⁷ That baton of persecution was passed from John the Baptist (beheaded) to Jesus (crucified) to the disciples (martyred) and now to us. And we think the end must be near because we no longer are the center of the universe in our country. All we know is that “we are in the next leg of the race. We don’t know if we run the last leg or not, and it should make no difference how we run the race.”⁸

In his initial response to the disciples, Jesus is warning them to not be deceived by current events. War and natural disasters and persecutions are not the sign that end has come. Some are going to come along and suggest that to be the case and they are going to deceive people. Recently I heard that the former televangelist Jim Bakker is back at it, “selling a seven-year supply of pasta, oatmeal, whey and milk and black bean burger mix in exchange for a “love gift” of \$3,500”⁹ among other things so you can honker down for the soon coming apocalyptic events about to happen. He is preying on people who don’t have a theology of suffering for the sake of Christ.

In our country, when a person is arrested they are read their rights: “You have a right to remain silent.” Jesus reads us our rights when we are arrested for the sake of the Gospel. “You have the right to proclaim the Gospel.” In the context of persecution, Jesus acknowledges in verse 10 that “*the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.*” The irony we know from church history is how God has advanced his church in the context of persecution. And so we are encouraged with these words, “*The one who endures to the end will be saved.*” But make no mistake about it. Tribulation and persecution and hardship are the norm for the one who carries his cross and follows Jesus.

That being said, Jesus does give the disciples a sign that alerts them to when the prophecy of the destruction of the Temple is near. He says in verse 14, “*But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader*

understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” As soon as the disciples heard the phrase “*abomination of desolation*” they would think back to the Old Testament prophet Daniel who spoke of one who would come into Jerusalem and desecrate the Temple. This happened about 150 years later when Antiochus Epiphanes conquered Jerusalem and did detestable things in the Temple to express his dominance over Israel. He sacrificed pigs on the altar, erected a statute of Zeus in the Temple and he set up a brothel in the outer chambers. And so Jesus is saying that when you see these kinds of things happening again, you will know that the time is near and you should flee to the mountains.

There were several things that happened to the Temple as 70 AD drew near that might be “the sign” Jesus is speaking about here. What led to the siege of the city of Jerusalem and its eventual destruction by the Roman army was a group of Jewish Zealots who sought to shake free from Roman control. These Zealots gained control of the Temple around 67-68 AD. Once they gained control of the Temple, they didn’t restrict those who entered the Holy of Holies, murders were committed in the Temple and they installed a man by the name of Phanni as priest. Josephus said of him, “that he was such a clown that he scarcely knew what the priesthood meant.”¹⁰ Church history tells us that when the Zealots took over the Temple, many Christians fled Jerusalem. The Christian historian, Eusebius wrote, “The people of the church in Jerusalem were commanded by an oracle given by revelation before the war to those in the city . . . to depart and to dwell in one of the cities of Perea.”¹¹ Josephus recorded that at this time the Christians were leaving the city “as swimmers deserting a sinking ship.”¹²

In 70 AD, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. Jesus said of that day had it not been cut short, no human being would be saved. The historians description of that day is brutal and I will spare you the details. But we have seen the likes of these things in our day with the Holocaust and other brutalities associated with war. The sobering commentary and insight into these events is summed up by the Christian historian, Eusebius, when he describes the exit of the Christians from Jerusalem so that “the judgment of God might at last overtake them for all their crimes against the Christ and his Apostles, and all that generation of the wicked be utterly blotted out from among men.”¹³ As Jesus promised in verse 30, this happened in their generation.

Stay Awake

It is at this point in verse 24 that Jesus turns his attention to what we call “the second coming of Christ.” He says in verse 24, “*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 in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” Jesus doesn’t give any hint of how long it will be from the destruction of the Temple to the return of Christ. And here we are, two thousand years later. We wait.

The return of Jesus Christ is the central hope of the New Testament. For us it is a day of hope and a day for which we long. It is a day when Jesus comes in power as King of kings to fully restore this broken world. In 2 Peter 3, Peter says that many scoff at this idea since it is yet to occur. Why such a long delay? Well Peter says, *“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”* The implication here is that those who fail to repent will “perish.” The second coming of Christ is a time of judgment. We confess through the creed that Jesus “ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” It is a fearful thing to stand before God as your judge. None of us can stand on our own. Let the image of the Temple and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD stand as a testament that when the judgment of God comes it is complete and dreadful. That is why Jesus went to the cross. On the cross, Jesus took the wrath of God for your sin. So if you repent of your sin and turn in faith to Jesus, when he comes he will *“gather [you] his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”*

When will this happen? What is the sign of his coming? Jesus says in verses 32-33, *“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.”* From verses 33-36, three times Jesus issues the command to *“Stay awake!”* What does that mean? It means be alert! Unlike the disciples who fell asleep when Jesus asked them to pray with him in the garden before going to the cross, we are to stay awake. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said to them, *“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.”* So staying awake is about staying spiritually alert. Don’t be passive about your faith. Don’t become lazy in your faith. *“Therefore, stay awake for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: ‘Stay awake.’”*

This is the consistent testimony of the New Testament. It motivates us to godly living. Consider the words of Paul in Titus 2:12-13, [The grace of God] *trains us to renounce*

ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope the appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Consider the words of John in 1 John 3:1-3, *“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God . . . Beloved we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself as he is pure.”*

Consider the words of Peter in 2 Peter 3:11-12, *“Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . . Waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”*

Consider the words of Jesus. *“Stay awake!”*

Conclusion

While we expect tribulation and suffering, we proclaim Jesus and the kingdom of God advances. With our eyes looking up for the return of Jesus, we endure to the end. Not knowing when Jesus will return, we endeavor to stay awake and to give ourselves fully to Jesus. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

¹William Lane *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 444

²Kent Hughes *Mark Volume Two* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1989) 135

³Josephus *War* V 5.6

⁴Josephus *War* VII 1.1

⁵Will and Ariel Durant *The Lessons of History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968) 81

⁶Robert Gundry *Mark: A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 739

⁷Timothy Gedder *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology* JSNTSup 26. Sheffield JSOT 1989 p. 150

⁸David Garland *Mark: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 510

⁹David Weiss “Disgraced Preacher Jim Bakker’s New Doomsday Pitch” [newsweek.com 3/27/16](http://newsweek.com/3/27/16)

¹⁰Josephus *War* IV 3.8

¹¹Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* III 5.4

¹²Josephus *War* II 20.1

¹³Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* III 5.4

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. In Mark 13:1, the disciples were amazed at the beauty of the Temple, one of the “wonders of the Roman world.” Share with the group a place where you have been that you think others should see. What amazed you about this place?
2. Share a “spiritual prayer request” with the group—some way you would like to grow spiritually in the coming weeks.
3. Share something you learned from the sermon on Sunday. Did it inform you, encourage you, excite you or convict you? How so?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Mark 13:1-4. How do you think the disciples felt when hearing the news about the coming destruction of the Temple?
5. Read Mark 13:5-13. How do the words of Jesus prepare us for what to expect as we follow Christ? What commands do you find in this passage to help us along the way?
6. Read Mark 13:14-23. What sober lesson do you learn about the judgment of God from the example of what happens to Jerusalem in 70 AD. What impact should this have on us when it comes to evangelism?
7. Read Mark 13:24-27, 32-37. How should the second coming of Christ impact the living out of our faith? (See also Titus 2:12-13; 1 John 3:1-3; 2 Peter 3:11-12)

Taking It Home

8. What is something you need to do this week to help you “stay awake” as you live in light of the return of Jesus?
9. Share the name of someone with the group who needs to come to faith in Jesus. Spend time as a group praying for this person.