

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Mark 13:24-37



## YOU DO NOT KNOW WHEN THE TIME WILL COME

Mark 13, Matthew 24-25, and Luke 21 all give similar accounts of the sayings of Jesus shortly before he was arrested, as he sat with his disciples on the Mount of Olives overlooking the city.

Jesus was saddened and disappointed because Israel had strayed and fallen from grace. *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”* (Matt 23:37-39<sup>1</sup>).

His disciples did not comprehend all this. To them, God would always dwell in the Temple. One of them said to Jesus, *“Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!”* (Mark 13:1), as if to say, *“Surely we will always have our Temple!”* But Jesus replied, *“Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.”* You can’t depend on institutions and things like the Temple, no matter how big and permanent they seem to be.

It is a lesson we must learn. The temporal things we depend on will pass away. Jesus said, *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away”* (Mark 13:31). When we have a true perspective on life, this becomes evident. Every material thing you see, especially if you look in a mirror, will pass away and return to the elements of the cosmos. But your soul—the unseen part of you—is eternal. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal”* (2 Cor 4:18). Everyone sees the material world—the transient things. We must learn to recognize the unseen, eternal things.

Jesus took his disciples out of the city and up the Mount of Olives. Peter, James, John, and Andrew then came to him privately and asked, *“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?”* (Mark 13:3-4). Our lesson today covers the second half of his reply to this question. Before we begin, discuss three warnings Jesus gave in the first half of his reply:

(1) *“Take heed that no one leads you astray ...”* (13:3-8). This is a growing problem in the church today. People of faith are being led astray by teachers who have come to believe things the Bible does not say, or discount things the Bible does say. We must *take heed* to what the Bible says, and not be led astray.

(2) *“They will deliver you up to councils ... The gospel must first be preached to all nations”* (13:9-13).

Every believer living and bearing witness to his faith may suffer loss or even persecution, as did the disciples in those days. Perhaps you have noticed how suffering for the gospel builds endurance, strengthens character, and produces hope. Paul knew these benefits of suffering in faith: *“... We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us”* (Rom 5:4-5). So did James: *“Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing”* (Jas 1:2-3). It is one thing to read these verses, and another thing to comprehend them through first-hand experience.

(3) *“But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be ...”* (13:14-23). Some of the disciples would live to see the desecration of the holy place and the destruction of the Temple. A time was

<sup>1</sup> Bible quotations are from the RSV.

coming when *all* believers would need to flee for their lives. Furthermore, Jesus said “*False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.*”

One could in fact view all the events in Mark 13:3-23 as efforts of the enemy to “lead astray, if possible, the elect.” If a soul gives up on God and turns to the world for security, and begins to rely on men and institutions, the enemy has won, and that soul is lost. “*For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?*” (Mark 8:36). Whatever the circumstances, you and I are called to a life of faith. “*He who endures to the end will be saved*” (v.13). We come now to today’s lesson in Mark 13:24-37:

Mark 13:24-37. “*But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,* <sup>25</sup>*and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.* <sup>26</sup>*And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory.* <sup>27</sup>*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.*

<sup>28</sup>“*From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.* <sup>29</sup>*So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.* <sup>30</sup>*Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.*

<sup>31</sup>*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

<sup>32</sup>“*But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* <sup>33</sup>*Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come.* <sup>34</sup>*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 be on the watch.* <sup>35</sup>*Watch therefore – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning –* <sup>36</sup>*lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.* <sup>37</sup>*And what I say to you I say to all: Watch.*”

- “*In those days after that tribulation ...*” (v.24). Some say the “great tribulation” has come upon the world. Others say it is yet to come, or is beginning currently. Times of great tribulation have certainly come upon cities and nations in the past. Within forty years after our Lord spoke these words, a great earthquake devastated Laodicea. Tribulation fell on the Jews in 70 A. D. when the Temple was desecrated and destroyed and the Jews were killed or driven from their homeland. In 79 A.D. Mount Vesuvius erupted and buried an entire city in lava and ashes. Later, Rome fell to famines and finally to invaders from the north and east, and the dark ages began. Hurricanes and earthquakes have ravaged parts of the world since then, and so on.
- “*The sun will be darkened ...*” (v.24). The things Jesus spoke of—darkness and falling stars—were in prophecies familiar to the Jews. “*The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining*” (Joel 2:10). “*The stars of the heavens will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising...*” (Isa 13:10), etc. Ezekiel and Amos have similar sayings.
- “*Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect ...*” (v.27). Some of our Lord’s prophecy was really new. In this passage he said the Day of the Lord, long foreseen by the Jews, would herald his return. “*They will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory*” (v.26). This was new.
- “*This generation will not pass away ...*” (v.30). Some say *this generation* refers to Israel, or to the present age rather than a single generation. Others say *these things* in v.30 refer to the *tribulation* rather than his return, pointing out that Jesus himself said he did not know the time of the latter (v.32).
- “*Watch therefore ...*” (v.35). For weeks now the central teaching in our lessons has been *preparedness* for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus did all he could to urge his followers to live every moment in anticipation of his return. He used direct warnings and commands, as in v.35-37. He used stories like the two in Matthew 25:1-30 we discussed recently, as well as the last *judgment* in Matt 25:31-46, after which the “*unrighteous will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*”

People who long for righteousness have always believed God must intervene to save the human race. And God has done so. He has given his only Son to redeem all men from sin. Our lessons have shown clearly that those who put off living for Christ in anticipation of his return are skating on thin ice.

So as we begin this advent season, let us pray to remain ever watchful for our Lord’s coming, when he gather his elect “*from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*”