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Sermon Summary #41

The Temple is Razed and the Son Returns Mark 13:1-37 (Part Two)

I am convinced that nothing Jesus said in the course of his earthly ministry was as shocking and disturbing and unsettling to his disciples as was his prophetic declaration that the Temple in Jerusalem would soon be destroyed. Every stone of this magnificent architectural wonder would be cast down. The Temple, said Jesus, will be razed. This glorious center of Israel's religious life will be flattened.

After they caught their breath and regained their composure, Peter, James, Andrew, and John formed a delegation to ask Jesus, according to v. 4, "when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?"

As we saw last week in our first study of Mark 13, Jesus responds, beginning in v. 5, by telling them that in the days ahead there will be false messiahs, wars, political turmoil, famines, earthquakes, persecution, lawlessness, as well as the successful preaching of the gospel to the Gentile nations (13:5-13). None of these events, however, should be interpreted as indicating that the end of Jerusalem and the Temple is at hand. So don't panic! Keep your cool! These are events that will characterize the time between Christ's ascension to the right hand of the Father in heaven and the destruction of city and temple.

However, v. 14, when the Abomination of Desolation appears, then you will know that the time of great tribulation and Jerusalem's demise is indeed at hand (13:14-23). As Luke put it in his gospel account of the Olivet Discourse, when you "see" the armies of Rome surrounding the city and the sacrilege of the Roman General Titus causing desolation in the Temple itself, get out of town (Lk. 21:20)! Don't pause to pack a bag. Flee to the mountains!

Jesus makes it crystal clear that his disciples should not conclude that the fall of the city and Temple is the signal that his return is near. We read in v. 21, "If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it.'" All sorts of false prophets will appear and perform supernatural deeds in their attempt to mislead even the elect. But Christ is not coming back yet.

In other words, as I tried to demonstrate last week, everything up through v. 23 of Mark 13 is concerned with events that lead up to and include the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple.

We are now prepared to pick up our Lord's prophetic word in **vv. 24-27** . . .

Now hear me well. I believe that at the close of human history, whenever that may be, Jesus Christ will return in the clouds of heaven, accompanied by the angels of God, and that he will gather unto himself all the elect of God, at which time he will consummate his kingdom and defeat his enemies. Several texts make this clear, perhaps most importantly 1 Thessalonians 4.

However, I **don't** believe that is what is being described in vv. 24-27. So don't think for a moment that because I don't believe Mark 13:24-27 is describing the second coming of Christ at the end of history that I don't believe Christ is coming back at all. I most certainly do.

Most Christians today take it for granted that vv. 24-27 are an obvious description of the Second Coming of Christ at the end of human history. How could it possibly be otherwise? It seems so "natural". But I urge you not to pre-judge the issue simply because that's what you've always heard and believed I urge you to ***try to hear Jesus' words as they would have been heard by his Jewish disciples in the first century, men and***

women who were immersed in the OT and knew it well.

The problem we face is that it appears Jesus says his coming will occur “in those days, after that tribulation” (v. 24). Matthew says these events will occur “**immediately** after” the tribulation just described. The problem is this: if vv. 14-23 refer to the events of 70 a.d. (and I don’t see how any other conclusion can be drawn), why didn't Jesus return at that time?

There is nothing in the language Jesus uses or in the context of Mark 13 that would lead us to believe that Jesus envisioned a gap of now nearly 2,000 years between the events of vv. 14-23 and those of vv. 24-27. So how do we deal with this problem?

Many Christians simply insist that vv. 14-23 do not, in point of fact, refer to the events of 70 a.d. They refer to a yet future tribulation period immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. This period is usually identified with the 70th week of Daniel’s prophecy, hence seven years in duration. At the other end of the theological spectrum, Liberal scholars have simply concluded that *Jesus was mistaken* about the time of his return. He *thought* he was going to return immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, but he was clearly wrong!

Others, who embrace an extreme version of the *preterist* interpretation, insist that the second coming of Jesus was, in fact, his return in 70 a.d. His second coming was a coming in judgment against Israel in the destruction of city and temple, but not a visible return to the earth. These *hyper* or *extreme preterists* thus do not believe that Jesus is yet to come in the future. They do not believe that our Lord and Savior will return visibly and personally and physically to this earth to consummate his kingdom. *In my opinion, hyper-preterism is heresy. It is outside the boundaries of evangelical, biblical orthodoxy.*

As I told you last week, I embrace what might be called a *partial preterist* position. In my opinion, vv. 24-27 are not a literal description of the second coming but a symbolic portrayal of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, in the colorful language of OT prophecy. **The “coming” of Jesus is not to the earth at the end of history, but to the Father, in heaven, for vindication and enthronement.** Let me say that again: the “coming” of Jesus in vv. 24-27 is **not** a descent **from** heaven **to** earth, but a coming **in** heaven **to** the Father. *Vv. 24-27 do not describe the second coming of Christ at the end of history, but rather his enthronement and vindication at the right hand of the Father that occurred in the first century.*

As noted, when one reads Mark 13:24-27, you may at first glance have difficulty seeing in it a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem. This is because our Lord’s language sounds like what most people believe will occur at the second coming. Phenomenal events involving sun, moon, stars, and the powers of heaven don't sound to the 21st century mind like a description of what happened in 70 a.d. The reason for that is because we mistakenly seek to interpret and understand biblical prophecy by reading the New York Times, the Drudge Report, or some internet blog, or watching the evening news on TV rather than by reading the Bible.

Remember, *Jesus was speaking to a people saturated by Old Testament language, concepts, and imagery. From the earliest days of their lives they memorized and were taught the OT. Thus, when Jesus spoke to them of things to come he used the prophetic vocabulary of the OT which they would instantly recognize.* Consequently, if we are to understand the meaning of Mark 13:24-27, we must read and interpret them through a *biblical* (i.e., OT) lens.

Mark says "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." Are these **literal**, physical, astronomical events that one might see with the naked eye? I don't think so.

In the OT, *such language was used to portray not what is going on in the heavens but what is happening on the earth.* Natural disasters, political upheaval, turmoil among the nations, etc., are often described

figuratively through the terminology of cosmic disturbances. The ongoing and unsettled, turbulent state of affairs among earthly world powers is portrayed symbolically by reference to incredible events in the heavens.

In other words, astronomical phenomena, such as we read in v. 24, are used to describe the upheaval of earthly dynasties as well as great moral and spiritual changes. Once we learn to read this language in the light of the OT we discover that **great upheavals upon earth are often represented with the imagery of commotions and changes in the heavens**. As we shall see, when the sun and moon are darkened or the stars fall from heaven, the reference is to the disasters and distresses befalling nations on the earth. Let me give you some examples:

In **Isaiah 13:9-10** we read of the impending judgment of God on **Babylon**, which he describes in this way:

“For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light” (v. 10).

Clearly, these statements about celestial bodies no longer providing light is **figurative for the convulsive transformation of political affairs in the Ancient Near East, on earth**. The destruction of earthly kingdoms is portrayed in terms of a heavenly shaking.

We find much the same thing in Ezekiel as he describes the impending destruction of **Egypt**:

“When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord GOD. . . . When I make the land of Egypt desolate, and when the land is desolate of all that fills it, when I strike down all who dwell in it, then they will know that I am the LORD” (Ezekiel 32:7-9,15).

The destruction of Idumea (**Edom**) is described in this way:

“All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction” (**Isaiah 34:4-5**).

Thus, when Israel was judged, or when Babylon was subdued by the Medes, or when Idumea and Egypt were destroyed, it was not the literal sun, moon, and stars that were darkened. The literal stars of heaven did not fall from the skies, and the literal constellations were not dissolved or rolled up as a scroll. **These figurative expressions were clearly presented in a purely symbolic manner to characterize the destruction befalling nations and earthly powers.**

Language that describes the collapse of cosmic bodies (sun, moon, stars, constellations, planets), therefore, was often used by OT prophets to *symbolize God's acts of judgment within history, with the emphasis on catastrophic political reversals*. If this kind of language was appropriate to describe the end of Babylon or Edom under the judgment of God, why should it not also describe God's judgment on Israel as seen in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple?

In summary, Jesus does not refer here to the physical collapse of the space-time world. This is simply the way regular Jewish imagery is able to refer to major socio-political events and bring out their full significance. Mark 13:24, therefore, is stock-in-trade OT prophetic language for national disaster. Our Lord is not prophesying that bizarre astronomical events will occur; he is predicting that the judgment of God will soon fall decisively on the Jewish nation.

If vv. 24-25 are a symbolic description of God's judgment on Israel and the destruction of the city, Jerusalem,

what then of vv. 26-27? There we read:

“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.”

Christians today are so conditioned to assume that the “coming” of the Son of Man “on the clouds of heaven” is his return at the close of history that it is hard to gain a hearing for any alternative position. But we must aim to read the text not in terms of our traditions or preferences but from the perspective of Jesus and in the light of the Old Testament Scriptures from which he draws his language.

We must begin by pointing out that nowhere in this passage does Jesus use the term *parousia*. The Greek word translated “coming” is *erchomenon*, which could mean either “coming” or “going” without any reference to up or down or any such direction.

Here the “coming” of the Son of Man in v. 26 is an allusion to **Daniel 7:13-14** which speaks *not of a “coming to earth” from heaven but of a “coming to God” in heaven to receive vindication and authority*. This “coming” refers to an event whereby the authority and dominion of Jesus is vindicated over the Jewish establishment which has rejected him.

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14).

This is a vision not about a descent from heaven to earth; not about the second coming of the Son of Man at the close of history, but rather **a vision of the Son of Man in heaven coming to the Ancient of Days, God the Father, to receive his kingdom**. A new kingdom, a new and everlasting dominion is being established to replace the failed regimes of previous empires.

Again, Mark 13:24-26 is not about the return of Christ at the end of history but about his enthronement as King and Lord in the very middle of history.

This understanding is confirmed by what Jesus says in **Matthew 26:64**. Standing in the presence of the high priest and members of the Sanhedrin, Jesus declares, “But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” These to whom Jesus spoke are obviously not now alive. Jesus must be referring to an event in their first-century life spans. Jesus is saying that Caiaphas and others alive at that time will witness his vindication as the one True Prophet; they will see events that testify that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

“Jesus is using Daniel 7:13 as a prediction of that authority which he exercised when in AD 70 the Jewish nation and its leaders, who had condemned him, were overthrown, and Jesus was vindicated as the recipient of all power from the Ancient of Days. . . . Jesus, exalted after his death and resurrection to receive his everlasting dominion, will display it within the generation . . . by an act of judgment on the nation and capital of the authorities who presumed to judge him. Then they will see . . . for themselves that their time of power is finished, and it is to him that God has given all power in heaven and earth” (France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 236).

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and God’s judgment on Israel in 70 a.d. is all about Jesus! It’s about who he is, how he reigns as sovereign; it’s about the truth of who he claimed to be and the extent and duration of his dominion over all creation.

In other words, Jesus was not telling his disciples that *he* would appear in the sky. Rather, he is telling them that they will see a sign that proved he was in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father. Those who would witness Jerusalem's destruction would see in that cataclysmic event the sign of Jesus' enthronement in heaven.

Thus *the "sign" of the Son of Man being enthroned and vindicated in "heaven" is the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple on "earth"*. What does the sign signify? It signifies that the Son of Man is in heaven, exalted, vindicated, and enthroned at God's right hand.

In 1 Thess. 4:16, in the book of Revelation, and elsewhere Jesus is explicitly said to "descend from heaven" at the end of human history. But nothing in Mark 13:26 speaks of Jesus coming "down". It rather speaks of something that is happening in heaven, as the Son of God, the Son of Man, Jesus, comes "to" God the Father, not "down to" the earth.

Thus, they will "see" him in the sense that they will "understand", i.e., spiritually *perceive* that he is the vindicated and enthroned King. For "seeing" as a reference to "understanding", see John 12:40 (Isa. 6:10); Acts 26:18; cf. 1 Kings 8:29,52; 2 Kings 2:16; 6:20; 19:16; Isa. 35:5; 42:7,16; see also Luke 24:31; also note Mark 1:44; Luke 17:22; John 3:3,36; Rom. 15:21.

What that generation will "see" is the universal authority and dominion of King Jesus being vindicated and made known in the judgment of God on Israel. The covenant nation that rejected Jesus as King is now experiencing the consequences of his enthronement and vindication at the right hand of the Father.

The reference to "angels" in v. 27 could be taken in one of two ways. The word literally means "messengers" and may refer to *human preaching of the gospel* throughout the world. However, if the word actually refers to "angels" in the more traditional sense of spiritual beings who fulfill God's will, Jesus would be saying that the preaching of the gospel to the nations is attended by and perhaps even aided and empowered by the presence of angelic beings. We know from Hebrews 1:14 that angels are commissioned by God to minister to God's elect. This would be one more way in which they accompany and support the church in its proclamation of the gospel.

The "gathering" (v. 27) of God's elect is not a reference to the end-time harvest (far less to the "rapture") but to the global growth of the church that is on-going throughout this present age. It includes both the gathering of the saints into local assemblies or churches (Heb. 10:25; James 2:2) and the universal assembling of the saints into the body of Christ, the universal church (see Mt. 22:7-13).

Through the preaching of the gospel God, utilizing the ministry of angels, will gather the elect into his kingdom from the four corners of the world, from one end of earth to the other (Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; 13:47; 17:30).

Having made his point, Jesus then seeks to illustrate it by an appeal to the fig tree in vv. 28-31.

The fig tree in Palestine loses its leaves in winter and blossoms late in the spring. As they sat on the Mt. of Olives, a place famous for its fig trees (some of which grew to 25 ft.), Jesus perhaps reached up and plucked from one of the trees a branch. After all, he delivered this sermon just before Passover and the fig tree would have been in precisely the condition described in the parable. He pointed out to them the tenderness of the branch as the sap was moving into it and the sprouting of its leaves. His point was that **these are indications that summer is close at hand**.

The "fig tree" (v. 28) does not refer to the nation Israel, nor does the budding of the tree refer to the rebirth of the nation in 1948. There is nothing in the context to indicate he is equating the fig tree with Israel. This theory is based on the unchallenged assumption that Mark 13 is future; hence, all the arguments for taking Mark 13 as referring to events preceding and including 70 a.d. weigh equally against identifying the fig tree with Israel. Jesus was simply using what was close at hand to illustrate his point. That there was nothing special about the tree being a "fig" tree is clear from **Luke 21:29-30** where he makes it clear that *any* tree would

have made the point. Jesus is simply drawing a lesson from nature.

The phrase "*these things*" (v. 29) and "*all these things*" (v. 30) refer to events described in vv. 5-27. "All these things" encompasses those distinctive events which that generation of Jewish Christians would see in conjunction with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. When you see "these things", especially the Abomination of Desolation (Roman armies surrounding Jerusalem) you may safely conclude that Jerusalem's destruction is near.

The phrase "he is near" could as easily be rendered "*it* is near" (v. 33b). The Greek is ambiguous. It can be either masculine or neuter. If masculine, it refers to the vindication of Jesus as seen in his coming in judgment. If neuter, it refers to the desolation, desecration, and destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

And, as noted before, "this generation" (v. 30) refers to the contemporaries of Jesus who would live to see the events he describes. The people who were alive as Jesus was speaking would still be there to see the fulfillment of all these events.

In summary, Jesus says: "I want you to be alert to the approach of Jerusalem's destruction. Here is how you can know when its fall is impending. It will as surely follow the Abomination of Desolation as summer follows the budding of figs. But, on the other hand, when it comes to the timing and proximity of my return and the end of human history, not even I know when that day will occur."

The Second Coming of Christ

Whereas the parable of the fig tree makes it possible to know the nearness of Jerusalem's fall, nothing will help you fix the date or proximity of Christ's final return. "**That day**" (v. 32) refers to the **second coming at the end of human history**. This, then, is a major transition verse in the Olivet Discourse. It's important that we observe the contrasts.

First of all, the "but" with which v. 32 opens, implies a contrast between v. 32 and what has previously been said. Our Lord is clearly moving from the subject of Jerusalem and its Temple to that of his Second Coming.

The preceding verses, vv. 5-27, have described an event shortly to occur within the lifetime of the generation of people living in the first century. But now he speaks of a singular "day" about which neither he nor anyone else has any knowledge of its time.

Second, the change in subject is also attested by the issue of *signs*. In the first half of the sermon, Jesus gave specifics concerning events preceding and leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem; he gave instructions on how to escape; he even gave them one sign in particular that would unmistakably indicate the imminence of the city's fall. But now he says: "No one knows or can know; not even I."

Thus, one event was close at hand (Jerusalem's fall). It would happen within the time span of that generation and would be immediately preceded by the sign of the Abomination of Desolation. The other event (the Second Coming) would transpire in the future at a time unknown even to the Lord. No signs will point to that day. Perhaps Jesus spoke this way to keep us from rashly concluding that every new global crisis, war, catastrophic earthquake, or other sort of national or natural upheaval was the clear sign of his return.

If Jesus himself did not know the day or hour of his return, then he had to address his disciples as if it could occur in their lifetime. For all he knew, the Father could send him back in a few months, a few years, or not for several centuries.

Are you bothered by our Lord's ignorance? You shouldn't be. This is the mystery of the Incarnation, that the omniscient God, the all-knowing sovereign over the universe, could suspend the exercise of his divine attributes in order to live a genuinely human life. We should no more be surprised by Jesus' ignorance

concerning this matter than we are that he thirsted, got hungry, was tired, had to sleep, and was eventually nailed to a cross and died.

Living in the Last Days

Did Jesus provide any information at all of what the last days would be like? Yes. He does describe some of the features of that time in **Matthew 24:37-41**. Global catastrophes and calamities and natural disasters will be **common** all through the present age. They do **not** point people to the impending return of Jesus.

Rather, Jesus says that humanity will be immersed in the routine affairs of life. It will be like it was in **the days of Noah**. The world will be caught completely off-guard by the coming of Christ. People will be engaged in normal, routine occupations of life: farming, fellowship, marriage, etc. (Cf. Luke 17:28-30; 1 Thess. 5:3.). Jesus will come at a time of widespread indifference, normalcy, materialistic endeavors, when everyone is thoroughly involved in the pursuit of their earthly affairs and ambitions (cf. 2 Pt. 3:3-4,10). His coming will occur at a time so unexpected, so unannounced, that it will catch people in the middle of their everyday routines (see vv. 40-41). When will Jesus come? ***Jesus will come at a time when his coming is the farthest thing from people's minds!***

Now let's come back to Mark. I want to make two comments in closing.

(1) I said it before and I'll say it again, even the Olivet Discourse and its prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple is all about Jesus.

This prophecy is telling the disciples then and is telling us now that the temple is no longer where you go to meet God. The temple is no longer the place of God's dwelling. The temple is no longer the place where blood sacrifice is offered. The temple is no longer the place where forgiveness of sins is found. The temple is no longer the place where you go to hear God's voice and to learn about who he is. **All these things now are found in Jesus alone.** He is the true temple of God. He is the person/place of sacrifice where forgiveness is found and God's voice is heard and God's glory and presence are encountered.

So, when the Temple in Jerusalem was razed, was leveled, was flattened and not one stone was left upon another, the people of that day "saw" that everything the Temple symbolized and achieved is now found in King Jesus who rules over all the universe. There has been a regime change. The Temple is dethroned. Jesus is enthroned.

Do you see now that when God, in judgment, brought the Romans to Palestine and the armies of Titus laid siege to the city of Jerusalem and eventually destroyed it and razed the Temple, do you now see that this was all about Jesus: who he is, how he reigns, that he was right in what he claimed and the Jewish leaders were wrong.

(2) Here in vv. 33-37 Jesus talks about a man who goes on a long journey and authorizes his servants to take care of his estate in his absence. Clearly, the "master of the house" who has gone on a journey is Jesus and the "servants" whom he left in charge of his estate are his followers, you and me!

How are these servants to conduct themselves while their master is away? How are you and I to live in this time between the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father and his return to earth at the end of history?

Think about it this way. As we live in the time between the two comings of Jesus, temptation comes in many forms. False prophets, like Harold Camping, raise false hopes (result: disappointment, disillusionment, etc.). Mistaken signs produce fear, anxiety, and irresponsible behavior (quitting jobs, giving away money, neglecting family). The apparent delay of Christ's return leads often to complacency, indifference, or immoral self-indulgence, perhaps even scoffing. Lack of knowledge often leads to pessimism and resignation to the status quo.

How are we to respond? Be on guard! Keep awake! Stay alert!

Five times and with three different words Jesus warns them/us to be alert. (1) Watch or be on guard, v. 33a, (*blepete*); (2) keep awake, v. 33b (*agrupneite*); (3) be vigilant (*gregoreite*), v. 35, 37 (

The end of the world and the coming of Christ will come at a time when no one is looking. You may be mowing your lawn or perhaps hitting a seven iron for your second shot on hole number 12 at Kickingbird. You might be preparing dinner, watching a movie, or cheering the Thunder to victory. The time of the end will be so normal, so mundane, so boring and routine that your tendency will be to fall asleep and to think, "I've got all the time in the world. Nothing's happening. Everything's the same as it's always been." So why read my Bible? Why bother pressing into community in the church? Why share the gospel with my neighbor, there's plenty of time. Why become a big brother or big sister?

The point of the story is simple this: Are we passionate about the things that concern Jesus? Are we excited about what excites him? Are we doing what Scripture commands us to do? Are we engaged on mission? Preaching the gospel? Are we serving the poor? Are we memorizing Scripture? Are we loving the unlovely? Are we building a house for the homeless?

I'm not afraid of Jesus coming back while I'm watching a movie or having dinner with friends or while I'm at a baseball game or while I'm physically asleep or reading a book or writing a book. If it's ok for me to do those things before Jesus comes, it's ok for me to do those things at the very moment he comes.

The question is rather: Will I be prepared to meet him *whenever* he comes? Am I being faithful with what he's entrusted to me? Am I being diligent to honor and serve and worship him, in any and all human endeavors? Perhaps the best way to conclude is simply by reading and reflecting deeply on Paul's exhortation in Romans 13:11-14 . . .