

**Mark:
Back to the Future (Part 1)**

Mark 13:1-37

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Now turn with me, if you would, to Mark, chapter 13. In Mark 13 we begin what will turn out to be a two-part study of the thirteenth chapter of Mark's Gospel. I was asked to do the bulletin a week ago or so (because this was Thanksgiving week, and so on), and then I changed my mind this afternoon; and rather than look at it in the form that I suggested last week, I actually want to look at the whole chapter twice and pick out different things. So rather than just read the first few verses...one of the reasons the verses are printed in the bulletin is that many of you don't bring your Bibles, so let me reprove you gently and sweetly, but bring your Bibles! I just love to see Christians bring their Bibles to church, and I always think that's a great central point of our faith, that we love our Bibles — our own personal Bibles.

Let's turn to the word of God, and before we read it together, let's pray.

Father, we thank You again for the Scriptures, and now for this glorious passage, difficult as some parts of it are. We pray for Your blessing, for the illumination of the Spirit, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

As He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down."

As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?" And Jesus began to say to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He!' and will mislead many. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be frightened; those things must take place; but that is not yet the end. For nation will arise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will also be famines. These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.

But be on your guard; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. When they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by all because of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.

But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where it should not be (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. The one who is on the housetop must not go down, or go in to get anything out of his house, and the one who is in the field must not turn back to get his coat. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray that it may not happen in the winter. For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never will. Unless the Lord had shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect whom He chose, He shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, "Behold, here is the Christ"; or, "Behold, He is there"; do not believe him; for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders in order to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance.

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 that are in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth, to the farthest end of heaven.

Now learn a parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. Even so you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come. It is like a man away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task,

also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Therefore, be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrowing, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. What I say to you I say to all, “Be on the alert!”

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

This is one of the most difficult chapters in the Bible. Well, I suppose I would say that about half a dozen chapters in the Bible, but it is certainly one of them, along with its parallels in Luke 21 and in Matthew 24, and the parables that follow in Matthew 25.

This is world history, and we're going to do it in two half-hour segments. Everything from the time of Jesus until the very end, in one hour! This is eschatology. That is a word about end times, about the end.

It's a mistake to think that this is something merely to do with what happens just prior to the return of Jesus, rather than see that very often the Bible foreshortens the gap between the first resurrection of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus, and, as it were, sees the whole of that period (including the period we're in) as 'the last days' - the time between the two advents of Jesus.

I remember doing a series of lunchtime evangelistic addresses, and because it was Belfast and Belfast always had a sort of interest in end times and eschatology, it wasn't a rare occurrence, for example, to see a man with a billboard outside the city hall with 'Prepare to Meet Thy God' on this billboard, and people handing out tracts saying that the end is near, and so on. And I did a series of evangelistic lunchtime Bible studies concentrating on end time matters, and this was the first one. And I hadn't even begun to speak yet, I was being introduced, and a man stood up and asked did I believe in the 'secret rapture'. I was trying to be clever, and I said I believed in a rapture (I think *a rapture* is a good enough term for being caught up and being with Jesus...those who are alive at the Second Coming of Jesus - I think John Murray once said that *rapture* is a perfectly good word), but that I didn't believe in a secret rapture; in fact, I believed the Second Coming was one of the noisiest events in the Bible! It was accompanied by the shout of the archangel and the trumpet of God! And he walked out and never heard any of the series, and that was the end of it!

The fact that Jesus is talking here about the destruction of Jerusalem, something that was forty years or so into the future in A.D. — well, the event would begin in A.D. 68, but eventually Jerusalem would collapse in A.D. 70, when the Roman general, Titus, with his four legions would march into Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed, and Titus would himself become an emperor in the future. That's also part of what Mark 13 is about.

Now watch how it begins in verse 1. The disciples are leaving the temple. They've been in and out of the temple the whole of this week, you remember; and now as they're about to leave this temple, one of the disciples (and it's often thought to be Judas) says, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones, what magnificent buildings!"

[This is the second temple; this is the Herodian temple, the temple that had begun to be rebuilt after the Babylonian exile, and Nehemiah...And then in 19 B.C., Herod the Great, for all kinds of reasons, began a construction project that was to last much, much longer than our construction project is going to last. It began in 19 B.C. and actually was still going on in 64 A.D., and of course the temple would be destroyed in 70 A.D., some six years after it had been completed. Most of the construction had been completed around 9 B.C. It took about ten years to do most of the expansion work, and it was a colossal project. Josephus tells us that some of the stones, the foundation stones of the retaining wall, were 42 feet by 11 feet by 14 feet, and each one weighing over a million pounds. And that's just the retaining wall! We've not discovered any of those stones, and Josephus did have a tendency to exaggerate, so it may not be that accurate. But certainly, if you go to excavations of Wilson's Porch and look down, you can see gigantic foundation stones, and then as you would have gone up into the esplanade of the temple there were columns, Corinthian columns that it is said would take three grown men arm in arm to circumnavigate those columns. It was a magnificent sight. There was no temple like it in all the world for its sheer magnificence.]

And one of the disciples, and perhaps it is Judas, is saying 'What massive stones, what magnificent buildings!' And Jesus replies and says, "Not one stone will be left standing upon another." And He's obviously referring to A.D. 70, He's referring to something that's forty years now into the future, but within the lifetime - not of Judas, if Judas is the one who's speaking — but certainly within the lifetime of most of the apostles that are there.

And then they cross the Kidron Valley and go up the Mount of Olives, and now they sit down, and they look down the Kidron Valley...and before you (if you've been to Jerusalem) is Mount Zion, and on top of it is the temple mount and the temple itself, and by any standards it was an extraordinary sight. If you take a tour to Israel (perhaps in the times of the *Intifada* you don't anymore)...but you'd go up to the top of the Mount of Olives (and hold onto your wallet, because it's full of pickpockets!) and you look down, and even to this day it's a magnificent sight, even of what remains. Of course there's no temple there now. It's one of...the third holy shrine of Islam of this day, of course.

But imagine that picture. They're looking down at the temple, and what follows is a question now that comes from Andrew and James and John and Peter. And they ask this question: "Tell us, when will these things be?" And then, you note, there's a second question: "And what will be sign when all these things are going

to be fulfilled?” And commentators — at least, some commentators — have suggested that actually there are two different questions here, and in order to understand what's going to happen in the rest of Mark 13, it's sort of crucial to understand that there are two questions here.

The first is the question relating to what Jesus has said about not one stone standing upon another — the destruction of Jerusalem. But there's another question that maybe the disciples didn't fully understand, but that Mark now, in recording it, is recording it in such a way that the question isn't merely referring to the destruction of Jerusalem which was forty years in the distance, but is actually a question about all these things, namely the very end itself, namely the Second Coming, and all of the events that perhaps surround the Second Coming of Jesus.

And Jesus in His reply doesn't always in a clear way distinguish for us which part of the question He's answering, and that, I think, because He doesn't want us to think 'Here is Bible prophecy and it refers to Jerusalem, and here is Bible prophecy and it refers to something way off in the future, neither of which have any impact on my life now.' But rather, Jesus can look at the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Coming which is beyond it as though they were almost on top of each other. It's like looking at two mountains, you know, and when you're going trekking in the mountains they look close to each other, but actually when you come up to the first one, they're actually separated. And although these are two events in the future, we know that they are separated by at least 2,000 years and maybe more.

Allow me then tonight to take a preliminary look at this, and I want to see a few things. We'll see how far we can get tonight, and we'll pick it back up again next Wednesday.

I. First of all, that history, the future, is 'His story'. I want to start there.

History is His story from the destruction of the temple in verse 2 to the end of the world (and certainly commentators are not sure in verses 23 and 24 whether He's speaking about Jerusalem or whether He's speaking about the end), but certainly by the time you come to verse 24 down to verse 27, the language has certainly become apocalyptic, and He talks about the coming of the Son of Man in clouds with great power and glory, and He will send the angels to gather His elect from the four winds. And it seems to me that at that point He's no longer talking about Jerusalem. He's talking about the Second Coming, He's talking about the end, He's talking about the constellation of events that surround the *parousia*, the coming of Jesus Christ.

So from Jerusalem 40 years hence to the very end of time itself, all of history — from then until now to the very end — is governed and foretold by Jesus. It's not

foretold by *Moore's Almanac*, not foretold like a history book with dates and chronological sequences of events that you can discern this one and that one and that one, and therefore in some way predict when Jesus is coming. It's not that kind of writing. But it is saying the future, whether it's 40 years into the future or whether it's right to the very end, it's all under the control of Jesus; it's all under the control of God.

The future is not open. The future is not undetermined. The future is not a countless set of possibilities, none of which God has determined. History isn't circular, as the Greeks thought; nor is life to be lived in some kind of existential *now* as though we should not give any attention to the past or any attention to the future. The whole of history is under the control and supervision of God. It's not a Marxist future that believes that the future is in the control of man to shape and form, but it's actually in the control and under the guidance and direction of Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus can make these prophecies, because future is certain.

You know, at the end of the day, Jesus says in verse 7, the future will consist of "wars and rumors of wars, but such things must happen, but the end is not yet." And then, in verse 14, He talks about an 'abomination that causes desolation.' It's a figure of speech; it comes out of Daniel 9 and Daniel 11 and Daniel 12, and it's used in First Maccabees as a reference to Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian general who outraged the Jews at about 160 BC., who went into the temple precincts, erected an altar for Zeus and offered burnt offerings in the temple, and brought about the so-called Maccabean Revolt under Judas Maccabeus, the plot of many an oratorio and opera. And it was, actually, the only time from the time of Nebuchadnezzar to the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, it was the only brief period when Israel was autonomous, when it had its own government and control.

Now obviously, Jesus is talking — when He speaks about "the abomination that causes desolation", He's talking about something in the future. It may be to Emperor Caligula, who round about 65 A.D. brought a statue of himself into the temple and directed that he be worshiped as God. It may be a reference to the Roman General Titus, who brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple; it may even be a look right into the future and a reference to the man of lawlessness that Paul speaks of in II Thessalonians that appears at the end of time, who will exalt himself as God — an antichrist figure. But all of these events are under the control and under the supervision of God.

"This generation," He says in verse 30, "will not pass until all these things have happened." That's a difficult verse. It's an extraordinarily difficult verse, but not if what He's actually speaking of at that moment is the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Now, that doesn't mean that the whole of Mark 13 has to be interpreted that way. Good friends of ours, some very dear friends of ours, interpret Mark 13 because of that verse as though the whole of it were a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and I think that is a mistake. I'm absolutely

persuaded in verses 24-27 that Jesus was not speaking about A.D. 70: He's speaking about the Second Coming, and He's looking into the future, and He's seeing two great events: one in their lifetime that they will see and witness, and this generation will not pass away until that is fulfilled; but also the Second Coming, which is way in the distance — but all of this is under His authority and control.

You know, that's why we may be so certain about Romans 8:28, that “God works all things together for the good of those that love Him...” - because He's in control of history. He's in control of tomorrow, He's in control of my future, He's in control of the future of the world.

II. The second thing I want us to see is that history, the future, is going to end.

At least, it's going to end in terms of this world of space and time. Look at what He says in verse 31: “Heaven and earth will pass away....” Heaven and earth will pass away. He'll say from time to time in the course of this chapter that this will happen, and you'll hear that will happen, “but the end is not yet” — because there is an end. There is an end to history, from one point of view on the eschatological calendar. From one point of view, the next great redemptive event is not the Battle of Armageddon, it's nothing at all to do with the state of Israel, it's not something to do with Middle Eastern politics, it's not the implanting of some microchip in your forehead. It's got absolutely nothing to do with Iran or China. It's got nothing to do with even the conversion of Jews, perhaps toward the end of the age. That's not the next great redemptive event. The next great redemptive event for you and me and for these disciples is the coming of Jesus at the end of time. It's the wrapping up of history; it's the bringing to a close this world, and the formation of the new heavens and the new earth.

We're living in the last days. We've always been living in the last days. From the time of Jesus' resurrection, we've been living in the last days, and, from God's point of view, this period between the two advents is a relatively short period of time. We're not being given here a precise pattern of events like Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* enables us to date the end, but we are being told in very, very clear terms that there will come a time when the end will come.

And you know what that means for these disciples? And what it means for these disciples living with the destruction of Jerusalem and perhaps their possible death? And what it means for you and me who live in the light of the fact that Jesus will come again?

There was a prayer that came from over there somewhere tonight, and I heard Ligon saying a hearty “Amen” because it was so much in keeping with this chapter. It was a prayer of thankfulness, of being grateful for what we've got and

not living in disease because of what we haven't got; of living each day as to the Lord; of being thankful for every blessing that God bestows upon us each day; of living, as the Puritans used to say, *sub specie aeternitatis* — “living in the light of eternity”; in the fact that here we have no continuing city, but we seek one which is to come, whose builder and maker is God, so that we don't put down roots here too deep that we can't pull them up again; to live our lives, as it were, packed up and, yes, ready to go, because this world — this world — is coming to an end.

III. History, the future, is going to end — but we don't know when.

Let me give you one more point very quickly, and that is that history, the future, is going to end — but we don't know when.

But we don't know when...look at what He says in verse 32: “But concerning that day...” — and the “that day” that He's just been speaking of in verses 28-31, the Day of the Lord, the Second Coming of Jesus, the day when this world will be brought to its consummation — that day, the date of which is not even known to the angels. It's not even known to the human nature of Jesus Christ Himself, but only the Father, because the Father has only given to His Son in His human nature that information which is redemptively necessary for Him to fulfill His task as the Mediator.

Now if Jesus in His human nature does not know the date of the Second Coming, do you think it's remotely possible that you and I can know it? Do you think it's remotely possible that Harold Camping could have been right when he suggested that it was going to be 1994?

I've just come back from Canada, and I was giving some lectures on eschatology, and a gentleman came in. I knew him as soon as I saw him; I knew what kind of species he was. He was one of those Christians who is besotted with end time things. And he had a pile of papers, and I just sighed internally because I knew he was going to give them to me! Which he did, and I only brought back maybe two or three sheets of them. But one of them contained his prediction for the Second Coming of Jesus, and...wait for it...take out your Palm Pilots...it's 2018. Folks, that's not far away! And it was on one sheet of paper, it was in fairly large print, and I said to him, “Sir,” I said, “I'm a math major, graduate; and I have to tell you that this math is not very impressive.” I said, “If you're going to give me a mathematical formula for the prediction of Jesus' return, it's got to be something much more weighty and significant than this.” And I handed it back to him, but he insisted that I take it with me. And you know, I wanted to say to him, but I just didn't have the heart to say to him...what I really wanted to say to him was, “What was the last thing that Jesus said to His disciples before He ascended up into heaven? “Of the times and seasons, no man knows.” That was the last thing He said, in the first chapter of Acts.

I remember when I left my children for the very first time alone in the house. You know, we gave them so many rules I'm embarrassed — but I remember saying at the end, “But don't forget this: I mean, whatever else you may forget of what I've just said to you, don't forget this.” And you know, that's what Jesus is doing in Acts 1 — “Of the times and seasons, no man knows.”

The end is coming, but not in such a way that we can predict it, that we can say it's going to be in this year or that year.

Well, there's more, and *tempus fugit*, the clock has beaten me. But Part 2 next week, and we'll try and tease out a little more from what is one of the most glorious but, at the same time, one of the most difficult chapters in the Bible. Let's pray together.

Father, sometimes we think and wish that we could spend so much longer in passages like this. They are so rich and glorious. We pray that as we study them that we might do so not with minds that will try to pry into the secret mysteries of God, but to do so in such a way that we might humble ourselves before You and be in awe of what lies before us. We thank You that He is coming again in power and great glory. And teach us so to number our days and to apply our hearts unto wisdom, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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