

Take Heed and Watch

Mark 13:1 *Then as He went out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!"² And Jesus answered and said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down."³ Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Him privately,⁴ "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled?"*

It seems that when we discuss prophecy it brings out either the worst and weirdest, or the best and most blessed responses to God. It's almost a test of the heart: when we consider prophecy. Do we get carried away with all manner of strange doctrines, or does it drive us closer to Christ, adoring His Gospel, longing for His triumph? To the pure all things are pure, and I pray His Word finds pure hearts this morning.

This section, which is repeated almost exactly in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 is one of the most difficult chapters to interpret. Interpreters and commentators have wrestled with what Christ was predicting, and how we should understand His meaning. The real difficulty is this: Jesus seems to be predicting more than one thing, more than one time period. On the one hand, He is answering His disciples's question of when the Temple in Jerusalem will be overthrown. But on the other hand, He seems to be speaking about the time of the very end, when He returns in glory. He combines it all into one section, and does not explain to us where one section ends, and where another begins.

Because we love simplicity and consistency, some interpreters have tried to squeeze Christ's words into one time period over another. So some interpreters try to make everything in this prophecy relate to the time period around 70 A.D, and only to that time period. Even though there are some things here that did not happen during that time in the truest sense, they want it neat and simple, so they try to explain how in some form, Jesus came in power and glory in 70 A.D. , judging Jerusalem. Some interpreters try to make everything in this prophecy relate only to a future time, and squeeze everything into a future scenario. Even though some things here clearly had to do with the Jewish disciples of Christ in the first century, they seek to make that re-occur in the future.

Instead of doing this, we need to remember a phenomenon that occurs again and again in biblical prophecy. A prophecy is given that has a nearer, partial fulfilment, but then the prophecy will telescope beyond that near and partial fulfilment to include a further out and ultimate fulfilment. Some examples would be Isaiah 7:14. Or Isaiah 61:

Isaiah 61:1 *"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; ² To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn,*

In Luke 4, Jesus stops reading before the words "and the day of vengeance of our God." Why, because Isaiah 61 was being partially fulfilled that day in Nazareth, but the final fulfillment would be at His return. In Daniel, we read about this little horn, who will desecrate Jewish worship. And we know there was a ruler who did so, Antiochus Ephiphanes. But even after his sacrificing of a pig in the Holy of Holies, the Jews were still expecting another, ultimate fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy.

This is the best way to understand this passage. The passage is dealing with the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. But then it telescopes out and takes in a future time, of which these things were just a partial fulfillment. Commenting on this passage, Charles Spurgeon said, "He told his disciples some things which related to the siege of Jerusalem, some which concerned his Second

Advent, and some which would immediately precede “the end of the world.” When we have clearer light, we may possibly perceive that all our Saviour's predictions on this memorable occasion had some connection with all three of these great events.”

That's how we should approach this passage. Jesus is not answering only one question.

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"Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Mat 24:3)

As Jesus and His disciples head out from Jerusalem back to Bethany, the disciples make a remark about the beauty of Herod's Temple - and it was a marvel. Jesus deflates their enthusiasm with a statement that must have seemed almost unbelievable: not one of those stones will be left upon another. Total ruin and destruction is coming to the very pride and boast of Judaism.

For the disciples, the end of the Temple was the end of the world. To them, it was probably one question. More than likely, they could not imagine a situation where God would judge the Jewish temple and overthrow it, without immediately ushering in the kingdom after that. They saw the destruction of the Temple as the final, fiery judgement of the whole world, and essentially the time when Jesus would be returning in glory.

Now what Jesus does is to answer several questions: when will these things (the overthrow of the Temple) be, and what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age? He does not tell them that there may be a gap of a few thousand years between those events. That wouldn't help them, or anyone. That's because the emphasis in the passage is not about setting dates, it's about preparing the hearts of His disciples. The imperative verbs here are: Take heed, Do not be troubled, Endure, Pray, Watch.

So as we study this, we are not simply trying to satisfy curiosity about the future. We want to know, what should we do? How should our hearts be?

I believe Christ has this prophecy in three sections: the beginning of tribulation, the middle of tribulation, and the end of tribulation.

I. The Beginning of Tribulation (vv5-13)

⁵ *And Jesus, answering them, began to say: "Take heed that no one deceives you."⁶ "For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and will deceive many."⁷ "But when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen, but the end is not yet."⁸ "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines and troubles. These are the beginnings of sorrows."⁹ "But watch out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them."¹⁰ "And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations."¹¹ "But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit."¹² "Now brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death."¹³ "And you will be hated by all for My name's sake."*

Jesus tells His disciples the first thing to expect is **deception**. False teachers will arise and claim to

be Messiah, or claim to be His sole prophet, or claim to know the way. And they will gain an audience, and people will follow them. And as much as believers might feel that it has to be the end, Jesus says, this is not the end, it is only the beginning of the end.

The second thing that Jesus says will occur is **disaster**. There will be disasters of wars, with countries invading one another, destroying one another. All the terror and pain and destruction that comes with war will occur. And alongside that, natural and man-made disasters, such as earthquakes, and famines, and various troubles. In the middle of war, in the aftermath of cataclysmic disasters, we are tempted to say, this must be it, we're at the very end. But Jesus says, it is the beginning of sorrows.

The third thing that Jesus says will happen is **distress and persecution**. As the Gospel spreads, all peoples will have some kind of hostility to the Gospel, and Christians will be accused, maligned, tried as criminals, beaten, imprisoned, and killed. Jesus even comforts those who are suddenly arrested that the Holy Spirit will give the words of testimony. And when you have persecution, you also have betrayal. Jesus says, families will split apart as this persecution takes place. But Jesus says, this is not the end. The Gospel has to be preached to all nations before the actual end. This persecution is a way of spreading that Gospel. Jesus says, you are to endure to the end. You keep your testimony, and do not deny Me.

All this is the beginning of sorrows. In the first century, the disciples began to see this between 33 A.D. and the next three decades. False teachers abounded. Heresies spread early in the life of the church. Early forms of Gnosticism began appearing. Within Judaism, the Zealots began putting themselves forward as the liberators of Israel.

The peace which Rome had enjoyed began to be broken. Conflict in Israel began in the 60s, and all out war with Rome began in the year 66. There were famines and troubles and natural disasters.

From the earliest years in the book of Acts, persecution was experienced by the church. At first it was Jewish persecution, but as soon as the Gentiles realised Christians were opposed to their pagan cult and emperor worship, they joined in. And when Nero was on the throne in the 60s, all-out persecution broke out against the Christians throughout the empire.

So the first part of the question, when will the Temple be destroyed, is answered by Jesus. When you see these things, know that it is not yet the time, but the beginnings of the time.

What about the other questions, His return, the end of the age? Well, these still apply. Before the Lord's Return, the beginning of troubles will include these things. The church has often seen these signs. The deception of false teachers, the destruction of wars, the distress of persecution. So how do we know when it truly is the beginning of the end? Perhaps part of the answer is in Jesus' words in verse 8. The word for *sorrows* in the original language is actually 'birth pains'. One of the things about birth pains is that they are the early warning signs that birth is coming. And it is when those pains increase in frequency, when the time between those labour pains shortens, that a mother knows delivery is near.

It is not just disasters, deceptions and the distress of persecution. It is the amount and frequency of those things, increasing, and multiplying that should cause the church to watch, take heed, and look out for the actual tribulation.

II. The Middle of Tribulation

¹⁴ "So when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not " (let the reader understand), "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.¹⁵ "Let him who is on the housetop not go down into the house, nor enter to take anything out of his house.¹⁶ "And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes.¹⁷ "But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days!¹⁸ "And pray that your flight may not be in winter.¹⁹ "For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be.²⁰ "And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake, whom He chose, He shortened the days.²¹ "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'Look, He is there!' do not believe it.²² "For false Christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.²³ "But take heed; see, I have told you all things beforehand.

Here was and is the key sign. When the believers would see some fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy, that would be the key. Daniel predicted in chapter 9:27 someone who would cause sacrifice to cease, and in the temple he would do or present some kind of abomination. We know that Paul took it this way, because you remember in 2 Thessalonians 3, he wrote:

"³ Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. (2Th 2:3-4)

Israel had already seen partial fulfillment of this in the evil ruler Antiochus Epiphanies IV, who sacrificed a pig on the Jewish altar. But it was not the ultimate and final fulfillment.

Here was and is the trigger sign: some person stands in the Holy of Helios and desecrates it. Jesus says, when you see this, let it be like an alarm to you. Get out of Jerusalem, and go as far as you can. Don't stop to even get your possessions. Jesus says, what is coming will be unlike trials ever known. Loss of life will be staggering. And even during that time, more false messiahs will arise calling on you to trust them.

Now historically, some interesting things happened. In A.D. 67, the Jewish Zealots, those who wanted to overthrow Roman rule, took over the Temple, and installed their own high priest. And in fact, the believers in Jerusalem did flee, and got out of the city, and went to Fella in modern-day Jordan. So much so, that they were branded as traitors by their fellow-Jews for getting out of the city. But they were obeying Christ. Because what happened after that was absolutely devastating for the Jewish nation. Titus came in and destroyed the Temple, and not just the Temple, but the entire city. The Roman Eagle stood on the site where the Holy of Helios had stood. Christ's words were fulfilled exactly. Titus destroyed with utter ruthlessness. It is said that they ran out of wood to crucify Jews with. In one sense, had the slaughter not stopped, the Jewish people in Jerusalem would have been utterly extinguished.

It was unprecedented tribulation. But the words of Jesus seem to take us beyond A.D. 70.

¹⁹ "For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be.²⁰ "And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake, whom He chose, He shortened the days.

As terrible as A.D. 70 was, the Holocaust of World War 2 was worse. And as much as many Jews were threatened with extinction, the words of Jesus here point to a time when the whole human race is faced with extinction. So, once again, I believe Christ's words telescope to a future time, before His return.

I believe this sign has an ultimate fulfillment. There is still coming a final man of lawlessness, a final, ultimate, counter-messiah, that Antioch us, and Nero, and Napoleon, and Hitler were only

pictures of. And I believe the same sign is given to believers to look for. In some shape or form, this final man of lawlessness will stand in a place or position where he ought not, and claim for himself worship that belongs to God. I don't know what that will look like. I don't know if it will be in a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. I don't know if he will stand in the Dome of the Rock. I don't know if he will stand in Rome. I don't know if he will stand in the place of a friend to Christ and the Gospel in some world broadcast. But when he does it, watchful, alert believers will know this is it: the man of lawlessness just usurped the worship that belongs to Christ. He just set himself up as the way to God, as the Son of God, as God.

And while a believer may not be living in Judea, the warning would be, prepare. Trust God, and take heed, because tribulation is coming, and it will be unlike what has happened, and it will never happen again. Believers can rejoice that God will be in full control of the duration of those days, and they will not last a day longer than they need to.

III. The End of Tribulation

²⁴ "But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light;²⁵ "the stars of heaven will fall, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ "And then He will send His angels, and gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest part of earth to the farthest part of heaven.

At the end of these terrible days, Jesus predicts signs in the heavens. And following those signs, He Himself will return in the clouds, with great power and glory, with His angels. A trumpet will be blown, we read in Matthew 24, and the angels will gather all God's people to Himself.

Of course, more happens after that, but that is not Christ's point here.

I think you can tell that by this point, Christ's telescope has stretched far beyond 70 A.D. to the very end. Yes, as some have argued, Christ's judgment came upon Jerusalem in power and glory in the year 70, but those words 'coming in the clouds' refer back to Daniel 7, when Messiah comes, unmistakably visibly and personally, and sets up His everlasting kingdom.

Here the Lord tells us how the terrible time of the Great Tribulation ends, with heavenly signs; with His personal return; with the resurrection of all living saints.

I doubt that the apostles were able to put this altogether in their minds. But Jesus wasn't interested in making them experts in future history. Jesus wanted a kind of response from them, and so He finished with two parables.

²⁸ "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender, and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ "So you also, when you see these things happening, know that it is near-- at the doors! ³⁰ "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. ³¹ "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

The first parable is a simple one from nature. When the Jews saw the leaves on a fig tree, they knew what season was approaching. So, in the same way, believers could see these things, and know, generally, what season of God's program was approaching. Jesus says, the generation which sees these things beginning, will see them fulfilled. The generation that saw the beginning of sorrows in 60 A.D. saw it completed by 70. And the generation that sees the final tribulation begin will, if they survive, see it end, since it is predicted to be no longer than three and a half years.

³² "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³

"Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is."³⁴ "It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch."³⁵ "Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming-- in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning--"³⁶ "lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping."³⁷ "And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!"

Jesus says, my return is like a man who goes, gives instructions, and does not give his servants a time line for his return. If he had, they would sleep and act irresponsibly until a day before. So in the same way, Jesus says, I won't tell you the day, month, or year of my return. You have to be spiritually vigilant and alert on all days, all months, all years. No one knows the day, not even the angels, not even the Son. What does that mean? Well, remember that Jesus, in His humanity, surrendered the independent use of His divine prerogatives to the Father and the Spirit. In some cases, that included pieces of knowledge. He chose to not assert His omniscience and find out the date. How much more should we give up on date-setting, and choose to be obedient, spiritually watchful?

May I give you three simple thoughts as to how to be spiritually watchful.

- 1) Keep a watch on yourself. Don't let the cares of this life, its comforts, its attractions cause a kind of spiritual drowsiness to develop in you, where you care little for the things of God. Make sure you are feeding your soul with the Word and prayer and fellowship. Keep up the spiritual disciplines. Watch to make sure you are right with God, and in fellowship with your Creator through Jesus Christ. When Jesus compares His return to the days of Noah, His point is that the people were so given to eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage, that they paid no heed to Noah's preaching.
- 2) Keep a watch on God's work in the church. The church according to 1 Timothy 3:15 is the pillar and ground of the truth. So, as Psalm 11:3 says: "³ *If the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do?*" With the ever present, and growing amount of false doctrine, you will need to be vigilant, doctrinally literate, skilled in interpreting God's Word, not tossed to and fro by whims and new doctrines and sensationalistic books and websites. Take your stand in the historic, orthodox, Gospel-teaching Christian faith. Seek orthodoxy in doctrine, and orthopraxy in actions, and orthopathy in your affections and desires.
- 3) Keep a watch on God's world. Yes, understand what is going on in the world, but understand that none of us has an omniscient understanding and perfect grasp on world events. It comes to us filtered and interpreted by media houses anyway. So watch and look, but do not interpret your Bible using your newspaper. Interpret the Word on its own terms, keep a watch on your walk with God, keep a watch on the health of God's church, and then, holding it loosely, watch what goes on in God's world.