

"Watch!"

When you look at a mountain range from a distance, you probably see a number of peaks and they probably appear to all be very close together. They might even look right next to each other. And yet, as you get closer and closer to the mountain peaks, you usually find that they are actually very far apart, maybe many miles away. You see, perspective is everything, and sometimes looking at two different things from far away, they can look much closer than they actually are.

I bring up this simple analogy because in our passage for today we have a lot of prophecy about the end times. And this prophecy is in one sense about the destruction of the temple. But in another sense it's about all the tribulation leading up to the end when Christ returns. And yet the prophecies in this chapter, to a certain degree, seem to bring these events together, all in close proximity to each other. And yet we know from history that the temple was destroyed all the way back in 70 AD. That's almost 2000 years ago, and the end has not yet come. Christ has not yet come back. You see, a very simplistic reading of this prophecy could lend you to think that the end should have already come back in 70 AD. But, that would be too simplistic of an interpretation.

You see, whenever you get into prophecy, we find in Scripture that it typically leaves as many questions unanswered as it does answered. We don't like that of course. We want a crystal clear explanation of exactly how everything in history will unfold. But that's not what God gives us. Prophecy gives us some information about the future, but not every detail. This is even more the case when we get prophecy in the form of the apocalyptic genre. The book of Revelation is such an example. So are the last few chapters of the book of Daniel, and other passages in Scripture. The apocalyptic genre is full of symbols and images, colored with numerous Scriptural allusions that point to the way forward. But they often work more like parables - using examples to give us a glimpse of certain details about the future, rather than working like a video camera recording the actual explicit events as they happen. You see when God gives us prophecy, he gives us enough. He gives us enough so that we can live by faith, even if we don't have the full perspective yet to fully understand how everything will work out.

For example, there were prophecies in the Old Testament about how the Messiah would be someone who would suffer for the sins of God's people while at the same time come in glory. It was hard to see how both those things could be true from the vantage point in history before Jesus came to earth. But now, we see those prophecies much more clearly. Now we see clearly that the Messiah would have two comings. The first coming he came to suffer and die for God's people. The second coming he will come in glory. And yet in these Old Testament prophecies, God gave his people enough for having a real faith in a coming Messiah. They had to live by faith in that expectation, being content with what mysteries God had revealed to them.

This is much the case with this chapter in Mark 13. There has been so much speculation and thought on this chapter. We find so many people that want to use this chapter and other prophecies to pin point *exactly* how everything will unfold. And they often get into trouble because they forget the perspective given in prophecies. These are things told from a distance. They are like seeing the mountain peaks from a distance. And though this passage wouldn't be considered full blown apocalyptic in terms of genre, there are certainly elements of it,

especially as Jesus quotes from some apocalyptic Scriptures and interacts with them. My point is, that as we look at this passage, we must take caution. We must try to understand what God is telling us about the future, and what he is not telling us. And we must look for the reason why he is giving us this glimpse of the future. You see, that's usually the most important part. For example, the book of Revelation. So much ink has been spilled about the "what". What will come in the future. But so little emphasis is given on the real point and purpose of the book. The book of Revelation is given to encourage Christians to persevere amidst tribulation, because that must happen according to God's plan, but in the end everything works out for good. And so we need to ask the same thing about this passage. Why did Jesus tell us about these things in the future? And so let's dig into this passage, understand what signs we are given about the end, and try to understand the purpose of why Jesus is giving us this information.

Let's begin in verses 1-2. This sets the context for this chapter. Jesus and the disciples leave the temple and one of the disciples is struck with the outward beauty of the temple. By the way I think that's a pretty ironic response after what we just saw in the last chapter. In the last chapter Jesus had just warned against the scribes who focused on outward exaltation and earthly glory and Jesus contrasted that with the poor widow who gave from her heart - something not outwardly glorious, but of far greater worth according to Jesus. Then here this disciple immediately gets caught up with the external beauty of the temple, while failing to see the far greater beauty of Jesus standing there before them, the one who is the physical, bodily, manifestation of everything the temple represented - God with man.

And so Jesus immediately responds by predicting to them the destruction of the temple. Not a single stone would be left Jesus says. As you can imagine, this sparked immediate questions in the minds of the disciples. And so when Peter, James, Andrew, and John find themselves alone with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, they ask him about this prophesy. Verse 4. Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled? Now if you look at the parallel passage in Matthew (24:3) you'll see a slightly expanded question. In Matthew's account you'll see that in one breath the disciples are asking about the destruction of the temple, and in another breath they are asking about Jesus' second coming and the end of the age. That's an important thing to understand. It's implied here in Mark and explicit in Matthew. It seems the disciples assume that the destruction of Jerusalem would coincide with Jesus' return and the end of the world. That's apparently what they thought, and as we look at Jesus answer' there are hints here that this won't be the case. But that's why we see Jesus not just answering about the temple destruction, but also about all the signs and events leading up to his return and the end. Because of this, Jesus' prophecy speaks about the destruction of the temple, and the other signs of the end all together. But I don't think we should think that means that everything prophesied here was fulfilled back in 70 AD when the temple was destroyed. Neither do I think we should see all of this as still to be in the future. Rather, with the temple destruction happening, and many of the other signs already happening, we should know that we are in the last days and Jesus could come back at any time. And so again I think as we look at this prophecy here, we need to step back and realize that we are looking at the mountain peaks from a distance, so to speak. And now as we are in these final days, we are beginning to see the distance from the different peaks a little more clearly.

And so let's consider the different signs that Jesus gives us that tells us that the end is near. Look first at the section found in verses 5-13. Verse 9 describes these first signs as the birth pains. When it says that these are the beginnings of sorrows, it's literally in the Greek, the beginning of "birth pains."

There's of course Old Testament references that compare the final judgment day of the Lord as a woman in labor, and so Jesus is being consistent with Old Testament prophecy. And so look with me at these signs. All these signs describe tribulation and unrest! This is tribulation that will affect the world in general, but it will especially affect Christians.

The first sign according to verse 5 is that of religious deception and unrest. We must watch out for any who come in Jesus' name who are actually false christs! People trying to deceive us! Of course this ultimately affects non-Christians, because it's not possible as Jesus said in verse 22, to deceive the elect. And yet these false Christ's will certainly try. And certainly many in the church will be affected by this. People led astray out of the church to deceptions, lured away even by false signs and wonders. Certainly we've seen such antichrists already at work in the church (1 John).

Another sign is that of political unrest (verse 6). There will be wars and rumors of wars. Kingdoms and peoples will fight against each other! Ever see anything like that today? In verse 8, Jesus even warns of geological unrest with earthquakes and famines. Certainly these are signs of God's curse upon the world. Even the creation groans under the weight of sin, while it awaits the restoration at the Lord's return. And so the signs include religious unrest, political unrest, and even geological unrest.

Add to that list the signs specifically against Christians. We are promised persecution, verses 9-13. We'll be persecuted before governments, and before religious leaders. Our own families will persecute us. Society will hate us - verse 13, we "will be hated by all men." But in all this, we'll serve as a witness Jesus tells us. Our persecution will be so that we can tell the world about Jesus. The Holy Spirit will even give us the words to speak in such circumstances. And what's the goal? Verse 10. The gospel must *first* be preached to all the nations. All of this must take place before the end. These are all signs that the end is fast approaching. These are all the beginnings of the birth pains. Jesus tells us that tribulation in the world and especially for Christians is a sign that the end is coming. As God extends his saving grace through the church, it seems he will let up on his common grace that restrains much of man's wickedness. All of this is heading faster and faster to the final judgment.

But before that final judgment, verses 14-23 speak of a final Great Tribulation. Verse 19 says that in those days there will be a tribulation greater than ever before and never to be again. And in verse 24 it suggests that this is the final event prior to the Lord's return. In Matthew's account it even uses the word "immediately" (24:29), that immediately after the Great Tribulation then the Lord will return. Of course, herein lies one of the difficulties in interpreting this prophecy. You see, part of this Great Tribulation seems to clearly describe the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple that happened already in 70 AD. Many commentators see the abomination that causes desolation in verse 14 referring to the desecration of the temple when the Roman soldiers broke through into the city with their idolatrous images of the emperor on their standards as they destroyed the temple. Certainly the references here to flee to the mountains if you are in Judea would seem to describe the destruction of 70 AD. And yet the end did not happen immediately afterwards. And the degree of the severity described here of this Great Tribulation seems to look beyond just what happened in 70 AD. Because of this, many see this Great Tribulation having a multiple fulfillment. Initially fulfilled in 70 AD, but looking to be fulfilled in one final climactic tribulation just prior to the Lord's return. And of course, then connecting this passage with others, you can understand why some have speculated that the ultimate fulfillment of the abomination that causes desolation might look beyond the destruction of the

temple to the final Antichrist to come. The one who sets himself up as God among God's people, trying to deceive those in Christ's church.

I know this is a very quick review of this Great Tribulation. The reality is there are lots of books that try to understand *exactly* what is being predicted in every detail. And almost every author has a different take. But I think that's the problem. We need to see what is clear, and accept that God hasn't chosen to reveal to us every detail of the future. Yet there is so much to see here. Let me summarize the big picture. Jesus is saying that before the end comes, there will be increased troubles and tribulations in this world. Evil will seem to run more and more rampant. False christs will try to deceive people. All of this will especially affect believers as they seek to proclaim Christ. All of this will culminate in one great and final tribulation, something already foreshadowed by the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. When all of this finally comes to pass, then I think we will be able to look back on these prophecies in hind sight and see how they perfectly foretold all things. But for now, we don't have the perspective of the fulfillment, only the perspective of the prophecy. We should then see these for what they are worth. They are signs that the end is near.

But Jesus also goes out of his way to drive home that point. These signs show that the end is *near*, but they themselves are *not* the end. Jesus tells us about the end in verses 24-27. It won't be a surprise. Everyone will know the end when it happens. Everyone, every human being who has ever existed, will be witnesses of that great day. That's a day of judgment and a day of glory. In verse 24 he describes it in cosmic terms: sun darkening, moon darkening, stars falling. This is also Old Testament prophetic imagery about the great and awesome Day of the Lord (i.e. Joel 2:30, etc). And then Jesus uses a prophecy from Daniel chapter 7. He will come in the clouds with glory and power!

*That* is the promised Day of the Lord. That is the end. There will be no guesswork at the actual end. All will see. Judgment will come upon the world. Those who do not belong to Christ will face judgment. The heavens and earth themselves will pass away, in that they will be transformed into something new and better. And Jesus will gather in all his people who have been dispersed throughout the world according to verse 27. You know that is such a beautiful promise. In the Old Testament, there are several prophecies that talk about God gathering up his people at the end. And the prophecies usually center around Jerusalem and the temple. God's people are described in the Old Testament as being gathered unto the temple. But here Jesus tells us more. Those Old Testament prophecies of the gathering of God's people find their fulfillment not in the gathering into a physical temple in the old Jerusalem, but in a gathering of God's people to Christ. Christ displaces the Old Testament temple, because the Old Testament temple looked forward to him. That's why the book of Revelation describes this scene as the New Jerusalem where there will be no more temple because the Lord God and the Lamb will be its temple. You see, in the end, God will gather his people together, both the living and the dead; give them resurrected bodies and dwell together with them forever.

See, I hope you see the big picture here. When Jesus Christ came the first time, he came to suffer and die on the cross. He died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. That was a judgment ahead of time. Christ tasted the final judgment on the cross for God's people, so that they wouldn't have to at the final end of history. And so the cross inaugurated the end, but it wasn't the final end. But when he returns a second time, all his promises will be brought to their final completion. And so this is the good news of the gospel, that though we suffer now for a little while, as Christians, our hope is in the Lord's return. That will not be a day of judgment for us, but a day of blessing and resurrection! That will be

the day when we finally can see our Lord face to face and fellowship with him in person for the rest of eternity.

So we've surveyed this passage for the signs that the end is near. We've seen how Jesus described the actual end when he returns. But again the question becomes: Why? Why has he told us this? If he only spoke about the final end in somewhat mysterious terms, what was he trying to tell us?

Well, to start, let me tell you what he was not trying to tell us. He was not trying to tell us the way to calculate a specific date or time for his return. You know, other than the temple destruction, all these signs are rather general predictions. Rather, Jesus says in verse 32 that no one knows the day and hour, not even him, according to his humanity. And I personally don't buy into the response which says, well that means we could know the year then! No, that's just playing with words. The point Jesus is trying to tell us is that we are not going to be able to predict exactly when he will come back. And so that means this chapter in Mark is not about calculation. It's not about predicting a day or a time or even a year.

Well then, what is the point of this chapter? We'll he tells us with a parable. Look at the parable of the fig tree in verses 28-29. He says look at the fig tree. You know that summer is near by observing the condition of the fig tree. When summer approaches it puts forth leaves. The leaves are a sign of the nearness of summer. And so Jesus says in verse 29 that this is why he is telling us about these signs ahead of time. He's telling us so that we can realize that the end is near. The signs tell us that the end is imminent, that Jesus could return at any moment. People might question this nearness when they realize that we've been living in this nearness for almost 2000 years. But understand that the nearness is from the perspective of redemptive history. All of redemptive history was looking forward to the coming of Christ. Since then Pentecost has happened and the gospel has been spreading to the ends of the earth. And so in terms of major events in redemptive history, there's really nothing more to happen except the final events of the end. In terms of the big picture of redemptive history, the end is so very near. We are in the last days. That's what these signs signal to us.

But Jesus says more about the signs. You see this chapter is littered with commands. There are some 19 imperatives found in verses 5-37. That's a lot of commands. In fact the structure of the commands follows a regular pattern in this chapter. Jesus issues a command, and then gives the reason, and the reason is usually one of the signs. For example: verse 5, "Take heed that no one deceives you, for many will come in my name. Again, verse 33, "Take heed, watch, and pray, for you do not know when the time is." This is throughout this chapter. A command followed by a reason, usually a sign or something about the future. What's that mean? Well, this is very important. It means that Jesus is telling us about the future so that we would have a response. The emphasis is on the response. This chapter is not about calculation, it's about vigilance. Vigilance, not calculation.

Isn't that what he tells us at the end in verse 34? He tells another parable about a servant being entrusted by his master to "watch." This servant was the guard at the front door, when the master leaves on a long journey. But it was this servant's job to actively wait and watch for his master's return. He was to be vigilant on his watch, because he doesn't know when the master will return.

You see, even though there are many commands in these verses, many are the same commands repeated several times, and many are synonyms with each other. Most of these are commands for some sort of vigilance. Words like "watch" and "take heed"

are repeated throughout this chapter. We are supposed to be on guard. In the Greek, these are verbs of seeing, as with your eyes. As you see these signs they should mean something to you.

And so I hope my point is clear here. The reason Jesus tells us about all this future tribulation is so that when the future begins to unfold, we won't be surprised. It's so we won't lose faith or be discouraged. It's so that we continue on in the mission that God has given us. It's so that we stay focused on the plan. That we endure and persevere even amidst tribulation.

You see if we weren't warned in this way, we could lose heart. We could become discouraged. We could wonder if Jesus is really coming back. We could wonder if God is really out there. Just think about the specific warnings. When we see false christs and false prophets rise up, if we're not watching for that, we could be led astray, thinking Christ has returned when he hasn't. But no, Jesus says there will be no doubt when he returns. Or when we see political unrest, we might be tempted to despair, thinking that society is getting worse, that our ministry is ineffective. But Jesus tells us that the ministry must be carried on amidst this. When we see natural disasters such as earthquakes and famines, we might be tempted to doubt the existence of God. But Jesus has already told us that this is part of God's plan. When we are persecuted for being a Christian, when the whole world seems against us, and even our families turn their back on us, we shouldn't be surprised. Jesus has told us that these things would happen. At time the unrest and the tribulation will feel like it will overwhelm us. But at those times we should especially pray. Pray for God's comfort and strength to overcome and to persevere. That's the message of Mark 13. It's not about calculation, it's about vigilance. And may our vigilance lead to perseverance. Of course, as Reformed Christians we believe in perseverance more than anyone. And we believe it is a grace of God. We believe it is God's gift to all who truly belong to him. And so we thank God in faith knowing that as we endure under these trials, that it is because he is at work in our hearts and lives to carry us through.

Saints of God, there is political unrest in this world. There is geological unrest. There is social unrest. There is Christian persecution, and there are false Christs all the time. These signs from Mark 13 are already taking place. They have taken place in the first century, and they continue to take place. The end is not yet, but it is *near*. And so I'd encouraged you to spend some more time reflecting on all the different commands in this passage as you seek to apply this week's sermon to your life. Be vigilant, as Christ commands us here.

But I'd like to end with one final application for us as a church. I want us to think about this passage as we look to the new year. This could be the year that the Lord returns. Let's live like it. But what's that mean for us as a church? What's our part in these latter days? Well I think it's summarized for us in verse 10. Look there. The gospel must first be preached to all the nations. If there is anything holding up the Lord's return, it's this. The gospel must go forth to the ends of the earth. Remember, when Christ returns, he'll gather people from the ends of the earth. And where are we? We are in Novato. That's pretty far from Palestine, isn't it? You see we are doing crucial work here. We are part of bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth by bringing it here to Novato. And so as we close out 2008 and look ahead to 2009 I want us to have a renewed vision. I want us to have a renewed vision of preaching the gospel. A year ago I was just starting out here. And that was the message I was bringing to us on that day. I brought a vision of the primacy of preaching the gospel, of preaching Christ. And so I am renewing that call for us as a church again today. We are here as a church to proclaim the gospel. May that be the renewed vision of our church as we start out this new year.

And so be encouraged. If we are going to continue forward on this vision of proclaiming the gospel, we don't need to be anxious about it. Even if we meet persecution. Because verse 11 reminds us, it is the Holy Spirit at work through us. As we go forth to share the gospel, we do not go alone. Christ himself is with us as he lives inside us by his Spirit. May that be the source of our renewal and renewed vision as we head into 2009. Amen.

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