

# The Beginning of the End (Mark 13:1-37)

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*You know the time in which we are now living. It is now the hour for you to wake from sleep, for our salvation is closer than when we first believed (accepted the faith).*

*The night is far gone, the day draws near. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*

*Let us live honorably as in daylight; not in reveling and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy.*

*Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (**Rom 13:11-14**).*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Questions concerning the “end of the world” have always been among the most pressing posed by mankind. This is especially true today.

When the believing Christian raises questions about the end of the world, he does not go to soothsayers, astrologers, or psychics to receive an answer, but turns first of all to Scripture.

- What does Scripture have to say about the end of the world?
- What in particular does Jesus teach about it?
- If there is anyone who can, and *is* able to give us authoritative information about this subject, it is the Lord himself.

Whether the event which we call the end of the world will take place tomorrow or the day after, or later, or in several hundreds of years is one thing we will never really be able to know.

Still, Jesus Christ, in whom we believe as our Lord and Master, has told us many important things about the end of the world. They are of such importance that it is worth our effort to find out exactly what he had to say.

We will attempt to find the answer by examining the pertinent texts of the Gospel, especially Mark Chapter 13 (as well as chapter 24 of Matthew and chapter 21 of Luke).

We must also keep in mind that much has already been said about these things by the prophets of the Old Testament, especially the Prophet Daniel and before him Isaiah and Ezekiel.

Furthermore, during the time of Jesus, Jewish teachers were writing books which offered instructions about apocalyptic events, such as the book of Henoah (Enoch).

Thus Jesus stood in the midst of a broad stream of apocalyptic tradition. Christ did not reject this tradition but instead took over much of what he found, weeding out and often purifying the literature from many fantastic exaggerations.

For a fuller comprehension of eschatological teachings of the New Testament, a thorough study of the preceding and contemporary apocalyptic, especially of the book of Daniel, is most important, as the New Testament presupposes the old one, builds upon it, and brings it to fulfillment (see Matt 5:17-18).

### A. Overview

Chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the entire New Testament.

The thrust of the chapter is seen by most commentators as apocalyptic material concerned with the **End** and in some way;

- closely linked to the fall of Jerusalem,
- the end of the old order of things (Old Covenant), and
- the expectation of divine intervention in favor of the elect.

## II. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

### A. Overview

Jesus' teaching on the destruction of the Temple and the End is often called the Olivet Discourse or Jesus' Apocalyptic Discourse since it deals with eschatological (*last, final*) events, and was delivered on the **Mount of Olives**.

In this discourse Jesus teaches his disciples at length about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (A.D. 70).

- This coming catastrophe will mark the end of the Old Covenant and bring God's judgment on those who have rejected Jesus as the Messiah.
- The Temple's destruction is also a *prophetic* sign of the end of the world (CCC 585 – 86).

The expression 'apocalypse' is taken from the Greek word *apokalypsis* and means literally 'disclosure' or 'revelation.' It is particularly used in the sense of revealing the mysteries of the end of the world.

But what events or time period is meant precisely?

- Is it the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem that would occur just a few decades later?
- If so, what are we to make of the cosmic upheavals and glorious coming of the Son of Man in vs. 24-27?
- Or is it referring to the end of the world?
- Then what are we to make the statement that ***“this generation will not pass away before all these things take place”*** (v. 30)?

Did Mark or Jesus mistakenly assume that Jesus' coming in Glory would take place within a few short years?

**Read:** Mark 13:1-2

**[1] And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!"**

**[2] And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down."**

### B. The Temple Structure

Jesus had been in the temple precincts since early morning (11:20, 27). As he was leaving the Temple area, **one of his disciples said to him, "Look, teacher, what stones and what buildings!"**

The thirty-five-acre Temple complex that Herod the Great built was truly impressive. Some of the limestone blocks in the retaining walls around the Temple platform weighed more than 100 tons. (The blocks used to build the pyramids in Egypt generally weigh around two and a half tons).

**What wonderful stones** indeed!

The temple shone with gold and marble and belonged to the seven wonders of the ancient world. The temple was finally finished in the year 64 A.D., shortly before the outbreak of the Jewish war against Rome. It had taken 46 years to build and would be destroyed within six years (A.D. 70) of its completion.

### C. Jesus' Prophecy

**"There will not be left here one stone upon another . . ."**

A simple observation by one of Jesus' disciples about the beauty of the temple leads Jesus to speak *prophetically*, and maybe a trifle impatiently, about a terrible future event.

He could foresee what would happen within a few decades to all that glory. The **“wonderful stones and . . . wonderful buildings”** would be destroyed in a few short years.

Jesus' prophecy of the temple's destruction comes as a terrible shock to the disciples.

#### **D. Single Stone upon Another**

Jesus' words were fulfilled in A.D. 70, when Roman legions destroyed Jerusalem and brought the Old Covenant to a dramatic and violent end.

- More than one million Jews perished in the catastrophe.

Jesus forecast the Temple's doom, much as the Old Testament prophets predicted the devastation of Solomon's Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC (Jer. 26:6).

- Jerusalem had already decided against Jesus the Messiah, it had already rejected him.

***"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!***

***Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate.***

***For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say,***

***'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'"*** (Matt 23:37-38).

This pronouncement of Jesus, so full of grief and resignation, was spoken directly before he left the temple with his disciples. Only a few days more and he would walk the bitter way to Calvary.

### **III. THE DISCIPLES' QUESTIONS (MARK 13:3-4)**

**Read:** Mark 13:3-4

***[3] And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately,***

**[4] "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?"**

### A. The Mount of Olives

After leaving the temple complex, Jesus and his disciples go east across the Kidron valley and climbed the Mount of Olives on their way back to Bethany, where they have been staying at night.

They stop at or near the top of the Mount of Olives, which provides a panoramic view of the Temple and Jerusalem. While sitting there four of Jesus' closest disciples come to him wanting to know more of the details regarding the destruction of the Temple and the end of the world.

So they ask him a two-part question:

- **"When"** will this be, and
- What will be the **"sign"** when all **these things** are to be accomplished?"

The question they addressed to Jesus was directly connected with his previous prophecy about the destruction of the Temple.

However, the question encompasses much more than the **"when,"** that is, the time of the Temple's destruction.

It is rather a question quite simply about the **"end,"** although Jesus had not even mentioned the end.

- The prophecy of Jesus had caused their thoughts to turn involuntarily to the end of time. Why?

The disciples think of the destruction of the Temple as necessarily closing an age of history, as part of a cosmic collapse of some kind.

As Jews, they held that the Temple was one of the foundations of the world. Using language like that of **Daniel 12:6-7** in a similar

situation, they ask Jesus for some **sign** that this end-event is about to happen.

They recognize that the ruin of the temple would not be an isolated event but part of a series of events (**these things**) signaling the end of the present age of history.

#### IV. THE BIRTH PANGS (LABOR PAINS)

Jesus begins by responding to the disciples' second question, regarding the **signs** of the end; he will take up the first question, "**When?**" in verse 28.

In the first part of his response to the second question, Jesus warned his disciples *not* to take certain things as signs of the approaching end **which are not eschatological signs at all.**

- What Jesus said about this is also of the utmost importance for us Christians of the twentieth century.

**Read:** Mark 13: 5-8

**[5] And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray.**

**[6] Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.**

**[7] And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet.**

**[8] For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs.**

Jesus gives a series of warnings about what to expect in the difficult times ahead. The keyword "**take heed,**" that is, "**watch out**" or "**beware,**" is used four times in this discourse - "**Take heed that no one leads you astray,** that is, into heresy.

- The disciples are to be constantly alert to the signs of the times around them and on guard against being deceived.

Jesus then begins to elaborate on his prophecy by foretelling a threefold series of tribulations – false Christs, wars, earthquakes and famines, but these are not to be read as signs of the immediate end - **but the end is not yet.**

### A. False Christs

Who is it that the faithful are being warned against?

- In verses 5 and 6, he says first of all, do not let yourselves be seduced by those **who come in my name.**

In the course of time men will arise - Jesus even says many - who will pretend that they are the Messiah, the Christ, who has come back. They will confuse and seduce the faithful, urging them to abandon the true Christ.

- **Many will come in my name**, that is, deceivers will come invoking the authority of Jesus for their false teaching.
- They will seek to draw attention to themselves rather than to him **saying, "I am he."**

According to Acts 5:35-39 and extra-biblical sources, several self-proclaimed Messiahs appeared in Israel in the first and second centuries AD.

### B. Wars and Rumors of Wars

- Second, there will be wars and reports of wars.

In Jewish apocalyptic literature wars and strife were a standard part of descriptions of end-time events. For the early Christians it would've been natural to conclude that the disastrous Jewish revolt against Rome, which began in AD 66, was a signal that the end had come.

### C. Earthquakes and Famines

Finally, there will be calamities such as **earthquakes** and **famines** in various places.

- A severe famine did occur in Palestine in AD 46-48 (Acts 11:28);
- An earthquake destroyed Laodicea in 60 AD;
- A volcano buried Pompey in lava in 62 AD.

Such natural disasters were often foretold by the prophets as manifestations of God's judgment (Isa 29:6; Jer 11:22; Ezek 5:12).

Again, it would be natural to take these frightening events as signs that the end has come. But Jesus gives a different rule of interpretation: they are only **the beginnings of the labor pains**.

In the Old Testament, **birth-pangs** is an image of the sufferings the people would have to endure before the coming of the Messiah. The image suggests the pains of a woman in labor.

- Even such cosmic things as wars, earthquakes, and famines are not signs of the end but only of the beginning.
- This is a teaching of Jesus that future generations of Christians have not always heeded.

### D. A Note of Hope

Jesus characterizes wars, earthquakes, and famines as **labor pains** and thus introduces a note of hope. Jesus' words in John's Gospel are relevant:

*When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has come; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world (John 16:21).*

## V. THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP (13:9-13)

**Read:** Mark 13: 9-13

**[9] "But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them.**

**[10] And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.**

**[11] And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.**

**[12] And brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death;**

**[13] and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.**

### E. The Coming Persecutions

The disciples are not to be surprised at their own persecution by Jewish or Gentile authorities. "Councils (literally Sanhedrins) and synagogues refer to Jewish institutions; "governors" and "kings" may include Gentiles, though all of this could happen in Palestine as well as Rome.

With these verses Jesus shows us that before the actual "end" takes place there will be numerous persecutions of his followers; persecutions **"for my name's sake"**.

- And so there have been and still are in our day, and will always continue to be.
- However, Jesus does not say that's these persecutions are signs that the end is near; else the world might have perished long ago.

Instead, the paragraph closes with the sentence: **“He who endures to the end** (of the persecution”) – that is, to death as a martyr – **“will be saved”** – namely, at the Last Judgment.

Loyalty to Jesus may not only cause the rupture of family ties but the tragedy of betrayal by one's own family.

#### **F. And the Gospel Must First Be Preached to all Nations.**

By saying that the Gospel **must** first be preached to all nations, Jesus suggests that God's plan will not be complete until the full number of Gentiles is gathered in (see Rom 11:25).

- He does not say that all will *accept* the gospel, but that the Gospel must be preached in all lands.

This means that the end will not come before the good news about Jesus is preached to all the nations.

#### **G. Persevere to the End**

***But he who endures to the end will be saved.***

Finally, the teaching of this whole section climaxes in its exhortation to persevere to the end – that is, even to death if necessary. Jesus offers no promise to his disciples that he would intervene to spare them his own martyr's destiny. There is glory, but it is certain only on the other side of the cross, even for the disciple.

In undergoing tribulations, Jesus' followers are to be at peace and confident because they will have as their defender none other than the ***Holy Spirit***.

## VI. THE GREAT TRIBULATION (13:14-23)

### A. Apocalyptic Language

The language and imagery contained in this paragraph is typically apocalyptic.

- The apocalyptic language is principally a symbolic language which makes use of images to express ideas;
- Therefore these images should not be translated literally into historical realities.

The significance of the symbolic language becomes clear by studying its environment, which is rooted in the Old Testament.

The foremost apocalyptic writer among the prophets of the Old Testament was Daniel and his book provides the specific background of this part of Jesus' discourse.

**Read:** Mark 13:14-23

***[14] "But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (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, nor enter his house, to take anything away;***

***[16] and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle.***

***[17] And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days!***

***[18] Pray that it may not happen in winter.***

***[19] For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be.***

***[20] And if the Lord had not shortened the days, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days.***

**[21] And then if any one says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it.**

**[22] False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.**

**[23] But take heed; I have told you all things beforehand.**

### **B. The Desolating Sacrilege (Abomination of Desolation))**

***“But when you see the desolating sacrilege . . .”***

This phrase is taken directly from the book of Daniel (Cf. Dan 9:27, Dan 11:31, 12:11, and also Psalm 74:4)

The desolating sacrilege in Daniel refers to the Temple's desecration in 168/167 BC by the Syrian King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BC).

He ordered the suppression of Jewish worship, sacred books, and religious practices, and instituted the celebration of Greek festivals and the worship of Greek gods.

He plundered the Temple and erected within it, on the altar of sacrifice (altar of burnt offerings or holocaust), an idol of the Greek god Zeus (1Macc 1:31, 54).

Daniel in spirit foresaw that such an “abomination” would be placed in the Temple of Jerusalem, the place of God's presence on earth. Compare Daniel 11:31 and 1 Maccabees 1:54.

*Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the continual burnt offering. **And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate** (Dan 11:31).*

*[54] Now on the fifteenth day of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege upon the altar of burnt offering (1 Mac 1:54).*

Originally, therefore, the quotation refers to the desecration of the temple, and not to its destruction.

### C. Fulfillment of Daniel's Prophecy

To sum up: In Judaism, Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled in the year 168 B.C. when King Antiochus IV, the cruel and barbaric persecutor of the Jews (see 1, 2 Maccabees), ordered an "abominable idol of desolation" (an idol of Zeus) to be erected and venerated on the site of the sacrificial altar in the Temple of Jerusalem.

- A **desolating** abomination is so monstrous an outrage that it turns temple and city into a desolate wasteland.

Here, in Mark, that tragic event becomes one of those past biblical events used to describe a present or future event. But what event is being described - the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, or some other future desecration at the time of the End? Or both?

Commentators differ on the interpretation.

However, Daniel's prophecy refers to the *desecration* not destruction of the temple, so it does not fit the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D.

Jesus employs the term "*abomination of desolation*" or "*desolating sacrilege*" as a metaphor or comparison for something that will ravage the temple in the future, leaving it desolate.

"This part of the discourse is Jesus' most explicit and dramatic prophecy of future tribulation. It is no longer merely the beginning but the **climax** of the "labor pains" (v.8).

"Jesus is using biblical imagery associated with divine judgment on the last day, "the day of the Lord." He is referring to the calamities that will accompany the destruction of the temple (v. 2), which will be the end of *a* world, the world of the Old Covenant with its old order of worship."

“But indirectly these disasters are portrayed as a foreshadowing of the final tribulations that will occur at the end of history” (*GM – Mary Healy p 265*).

#### **D. The Antichrist?**

**“When you see the desolating abomination standing where he should not (NAB):”**

- This something could be someone, ***standing where he should not*** within the temple.

Jesus does not say what or who this desolating abomination is or when it or he will arrive but something is going to happen that will be as devastating to the temple as its desecration by Antiochus IV.

One commentator says:

“With the prophecies made by Daniel, and with their temporary fulfillment under Antiochus IV, it is clear that the expression “abomination of desolation” was not used to describe the destruction of the temple. There is not the least allusion to that in the text.”

“The expression was intended rather to characterize a personal being, an individual, who will force his way into the sanctuary and stand there like a divine statue to which sacrifices are offered.” (Franz Mussner: *“What did Jesus Teach about the End of the World”*).

In one interpretation, Jesus says that this terrible prediction of the prophet would find its fulfillment only at the end of time.

This reminds us of another text in Scripture in which St. Paul says the day of the Lord will not come:

***“unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so***

***that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thess. 2:3-4).***

Here, according to tradition, Paul speaks of the Antichrist who “is to come” before Christ returns, and whose coming “by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” (2:9-10).

No longer can there be any doubt that by his prophetic vision of the “abomination of desolation” Jesus meant the Antichrist who will stand, as the apocalyptic language expresses so obscurely, in the sanctuary “where he ought not to be.”

The Antichrist will not penetrate the sanctuary of God to destroy it, but to place himself there instead of God and to accept divine homage from the whole world.

Jesus is hinting that the appearance, near the End, of a horrendous sacrilege will signal the onset of the most devastating tribulation by which God’s people will be severely tried.

The prophecy, however, is partially fulfilled in the parallel events surrounding the destruction of Temple and Jerusalem in AD 70.

### **E. Flee to the Mountains**