

Mark 13:1-27

It's the End of the World as We Know it ... Or is it?

Our youngest child was born an hour away from our home. In those final days, we were on edge about making it to the hospital in time. One night we rushed to the hospital thinking my wife was in labor, but she wasn't. She was experiencing Braxton Hicks. This continued for a few days until, finally, we welcomed our daughter into the world. Braxton Hicks is frustrating for many reasons; the worst part is the delay of its glorious conclusion. So, it is with birth pangs. No wonder Jesus compared the end times with labor. Things may get progressively worse, but its end is glorious.

Mark first presents **The Setting** (vs. 1-4). After witnessing a poor widow donating her last pennies, the Disciples marvel at the beauty of the Temple spurring a surprising note from Jesus. Instead of marveling at the marble, he announces its destruction. Understanding the Olivet Discourse requires us to keep this exchange in the background. Everything Jesus announces has the destruction of the Temple in mind. It is natural, then, to expect the Disciples to ask when "these things" will come to pass (vs. 4). This is what makes this passage so difficult. The context regards the destruction of the Temple which happened in AD 70. At the same time, Christians have historically seen this passage to be a reference to the final return of Jesus (vs. 26). Let us, then, accept both interpretations. There are parallels between the apocalyptic experience of Israel when Rome finally sacked Jerusalem and the future return of Jesus.

This is followed by **The Signs** (vs. 5-23). Jesus first unveils a series of generic signs which include apostasy (vs. 5-6), violence (vs. 7-8a), disasters (vs. 8b), persecution (vs. 9-11), and injustice (vs. 12-13). What should we do with these signs? Many well-intentioned Christian leaders and students have spent an inordinate time trying to connect headlines with these birth pangs. We must be careful here. That is not the main point of the passage. In truth, we can look at every era of humanity and find believers connecting these birth pangs with contemporary events. Wars are all too common. Persecution is all too widespread. Injustice, disasters, and apostasy have always been present.

What Jesus wants us to do is more than observe and anticipate the fulfillment of the signs. But in knowing what to look for, how are we to live our lives? By knowing what to expect, Jesus is giving us the tools to persevere through both trying times and periods of apostasy. Regarding suffering, we are often tempted to question God's love and power. In these signs, Jesus assures us that he, as the Sovereign King, remains in absolute control. Faith prevents us from surrendering to a lifetime of uncertainty, doubt, fear, anxiety, and needless pain. The first temptation during suffering is to

believe we have been abandoned. Don't be so led astray. Christ remains sovereign, even over our sufferings.

Without faith, we will by no means persevere. Perseverance requires both *preparedness* (see vs. 5, 9) and *hope* (see vs. 19, 13). Knowing tribulation is coming ought to stir us to prepare all while we walk with hope. Labor concludes with glory.

Jesus then unveils a particular sign called the Abomination of Desolation which is a clear reference to Daniel 9:27. Most scholars agree that Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled in 175 BC when Antiochus Epiphanes IV erected a pagan altar in the Holy of Holies. He set up a Greek god (Zeus) in the temple and then made the Jewish priest eat the pig he sacrificed on the altar. Over 80,000 people were killed in Jerusalem as a result.

Jesus, then, is looking back at the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy as a model of something to look forward. That is to say, Jesus is prophesying another Abomination of Desolation that will take place. Without a doubt, the destruction of the Jewish Temple in AD 70 fulfills that prophecy. However, others see a rebuilt temple which will be desecrated. It is possible, therefore, this abomination is a reference to the Temple Destruction while simultaneously a reference to a final fulfillment.

Despite all of this, Jesus does not want the reader to lose hope. The misery of this world full of suffering and violence is temporary. Be on guard. Possess hope. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

The climax of the Olivet Discourse is **The Savior** (vs. 24-27). In describing his final return, Jesus borrows imagery, frequent in the Old Testament, known as "The Day of the Lord" (see Joel 2:1 for one example). Generally, the Day of the Lord describes a dramatic earthly intervention by God. The Hebrews Prophets tell us what to expect on the Great Day of the Lord which includes judgment, kingship, and even astronomical signs (see Joel 2:31; Amos 8:9).

Although there remains some debate regarding what the Prophets had in mind by the Day of the Lord, Jesus borrows some of the same imagery in describing his future return. So, although some of what Jesus describes here is evident in the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, Jesus's prophecies are only partially fulfilled on that day. Ultimately, Jesus directs our attention to his future return. That is the Great Day of the Lord whereby Christ returns, gathers his elect, judges the nations, and sits upon his eternal throne.

I do not know how to interpret every detail regarding the future. But I do know what will happen at the very end. Christ will return. Christ will triumph. Evil will cease. Death will die. And we will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

In 2018, residents of Hawaii received an ominous text message, "Ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii. Seek immediate shelter. This is not a drill." They were understandably panicked, but Christians know a day of judgment is coming. I don't know what it will look like in detail, but Christ will come and establish his throne. No need for us to panic.

Come Lord Jesus. Come.