

The Last Days (Part 1) -- Mark 13:1-13

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer.

Lord, we want to experience You in a real, personal, and meaningful way today. As we reflect on this story from the book of Mark, may our hearts burn within us as the Holy Spirit kindles a fire. May that fire cleanse us from our sin. May it begin a revival in each one of us that sweeps across our congregation, through the town of Lancaster, across the state of Ohio and around the world. We ask these things in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

I would like to begin with a couple questions. How many of you believe that we are living in the last days of earth's history, just before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ? Secondly, how many here feel anxious about living in the last days? So then, how many would say that their emotions about living in the last days could be described as excited and thrilled. If I am honest with myself, there is a mixture of emotions in my heart as I consider what lies ahead in the days just before Christ returns.

I remember listening to a sermon by David Gates about five years ago. It was entitled, "The Approaching Storm". David painted a picture of an imminent economic collapse in the next few months, or maybe a year or two at the most. He had traveled the world and discovered that the American dollar was worth little more than toilet paper. And this was his point: If your money isn't going to be worth anything, then spend it now for the spreading of the gospel. And of course, he promoted the miracles that God was accomplishing in his own ministry. This sermon stirred my heart like never before or since that we are living in the last days before Christ returns. And historically, no one has believed that more strongly than Seventh-day Adventists.

So, as we walk through today's story from the book of Mark, hopefully you will be able to identify with the Jews. For they also held a strong hope in the soon coming of the Messiah and the end of this age.

Now here's a summary of our story today:

As Jesus was walking out of the temple, His disciples pointed Him to its magnificent stones. Jesus' response was predicting a time when not a single one of those stones would escape being leveled to the ground. Later, in private, four of His closest disciples came to Him, asking when that destruction would take place and how they would know in advance. Jesus then gave a series of warnings: (1) against deception (2) of wars, (3) of natural disasters, and (4) of persecution. Meanwhile, the preaching of the gospel was to remain their foremost priority. Jesus assured them that the one who remained faithful to the end was the one who would be saved.

Let's now consider what Jesus experienced in this story. First of all, He experienced leaving the temple. Mark 13:1 says that "He went out of the temple." Just a couple days ago Jesus had marched into Jerusalem riding on a donkey being proclaimed the Son of David. He had cleaned the temple of a chaotic marketplace. He had encountered repeated confrontations with the religious leaders. It had been His final attempt to win over the hearts of His own people. But notice how Matthew describes the result. I invite you to turn with me to Matthew 23:37-39. (Read) If you peaked ahead to Matthew 24:1, you would notice the beginning of our story in the book of Mark 13. Had Jesus been successful in winning Jerusalem over? Sadly, no. He left the temple, never more to return. So, as Jesus left the temple that day, it was an emotional moment. He had been rejected by His own people.

Secondly, Jesus experienced predicting disaster and destruction. We get the setting in Mark 13:2. As the disciples were walking out of the temple with Jesus, they noticed the massive stones. It is possible that some of those stones were so big that only two of them would have fit in this sanctuary. Their dimensions could have been as much as 44.6 feet by 11 feet by 16.5 feet and weighing approximately 567 to 628 tons. Two of the more standard size stones, might have fit in your living room. Their dimensions were probably in the range

of 2.5 by 3.5 by 15 feet, weighing approximately 28 tons. According to John 2:20, the temple had been under construction for 46 years, but it was not actually completed until a few years before its destruction in 70 AD.

So that's the setting for what Jesus says in Mark 13:2: "Do you see these great buildings?" Knowing what was on Jesus' mind as He left the temple, you realize there is a disconnect here. Jesus and His disciples were not on the same page. Jesus was grieving the rejection of His own people and the disciples were admiring the temple's enormous stones. And so there must have been a sadness in His words as He said, "Do you see these great buildings?" In other words, "Is that all you see? Don't you see the people inside that have rejected me? They are what matter to Me!" Jesus' prediction of impending doom in Mark 13:2 is filled with negatives, four of them in fact, although only two are in the English translations. In His grief Jesus predicted utter and complete destruction of the temple building.

But these were in fact dangerous words in a culture that revered the temple. And they would be used against Him later. In fact, the primary accusation against Him at His trial before the Sanhedrin would be His words spoken against the temple. The religious leaders would throw these words back at Him while He hung on the cross. And even three years later similar accusations would be used against Jesus' followers. In Acts 6:12-14 Stephen, one of the first seven deacons, was falsely accused of blaspheming the temple and predicting that Jesus was going to destroy it.

There's a little more context to consider before we look at the other predictions that Jesus made. Mark 13:3 pictures four of Jesus' closest disciples coming to Him in private to ask Him about this awful prediction of the temple's destruction. The scene is similar to that of our last story. You may remember Jesus sitting directly across from the treasure chests, watching people toss in their offerings in the temple. Well, the same word is used in Mark 13:3 as Jesus sat and watched the temple from the Mount of Olives. While He was sitting there, these disciples came to Him with a question: "Tell us when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled?" So, in response to their questions, Jesus makes a few more predictions of coming disaster and destruction.

His second one is in Mark 13:5-6: people pretending to be Jesus Christ. Jesus would later promise to come again (John 14:1-3), but many would come prematurely. Satan knew that Jesus' disciples would miss Him dearly and would be susceptible to this deception. A third prediction by Jesus is found in Mark 13:7-8: successive wars and conquests between nations. He told them that these would be inevitable in a world of increasing evil and wickedness. A third prediction is in Mark 13:8: natural disasters. He listed specifically earthquakes and famines. A fourth and final prediction is given in Mark 13:9-13. It seems to be the one that Jesus was most concerned about: persecution. Jesus predicted that His disciples would be "betrayed", "beaten", "put to death", and "hated". It's interesting as you read through the book of Acts, you find many of these predictions being fulfilled.

Last of all Jesus experienced giving counsel. Jesus gave the disciples several admonitions. First, He told them to wait patiently for the end to come. It would take longer than they expected. Throughout this discourse Jesus repeated this thought. In verses 5 and 6 He said, "Many false Christ's will come prematurely, but don't be misled. Be patient." In verse 7 He said, "There will be lots of wars, but that won't be the end yet." In verse 8 He said, "There will be natural disasters, but these will just be the beginning." In verse 13 He said, "The one who waits until the end will be saved."

A second word of counsel from Jesus was to remain calm and strong. In verse 7 He said, "In spite of all the wars don't be discouraged. I'm still in control." In verse 11 He said, "When you are arrested and brought before governors and kings, don't become anxious about what you should say. Remain calm. The Holy Spirit will impress you what to say." A third word of counsel from Jesus for His disciples was for them to examine themselves. In verse 9 Jesus said, "Watch yourselves. Make sure your faith is not destroyed in spite of persecution. This counsel is implied in verse 13 as well. Jesus here assured them that they would be saved. And that was what mattered, not the preservation of the temple made with stones. Their own salvation should be front and center. A fourth word of counsel was for the disciples to make the preaching of the gospel a priority. This work must be finished before the end could come. Every nation on earth needed to hear what

God had done for them in Christ. Everyone needed to have the opportunity to accept the free gift of eternal life.

Let's now consider how Jesus is revealed as our example in this story. How Jesus lived in this story shows us what it means to be a healthy Christian. The reason Jesus came and lived among us was so that we might experience what He experienced. So, what did Jesus do and say in this story that reveals how God wants us to live? We will look at two ways in which Jesus is revealed as our example in this story. First of all, He saw people, not buildings. While the disciples were filled with admiration for the temple's construction, Jesus was filled with heart-broken grief. His heart was broken from being rejected by His own people. So, in response to the disciples' comment regarding the large stones of the temple, He said in Mark 13:2, "Do you see the buildings?" And here's the implication: "Is that all? That's not what I see. I see people, not buildings!" In Mark 13:3, 4 the disciples were alarmed about Jesus' prediction that the temple would be completely destroyed. But throughout Jesus' discourse in verses 5-13 He says nothing about the temple. It's all about them and everyone in the world being saved, not a building.

So, what do you see? People or buildings? The purpose of this building is to provide a place where people can meet and experience God, right? If there were no people, the building would be worthless as a sanctuary. Our family occasionally goes to Columbus and feels a sense of admiration for the tall skyscrapers. But what worth do these buildings have in comparison with the people who work in them? Jesus had a heart for people. Every person whom He met mattered to Him. So, how do we experience what Jesus experienced? Some people have miraculous life-changing conversations with people on airplanes and buses. Others like to hand out tracts and books to people they meet. For me I think the most fulfilling ministry I've had with total strangers is saying a silent prayer for them. I don't know what they're going through, but God does. So I just pray for God to bless their relationships – their relationship with God, their co-workers, friends and family. I mean, everybody has relationships, right? They might not be close and intimate. They might not be healthy. But everybody has them. If I have any indication that they're married, I'll pray for God to bless their marriage. When I do this, I feel a connection with a perfect stranger. And this ministry has been most effective when the person has offended me or I've had a judgmental thought about them. Suddenly I feel a kinship with them. They're just like me and are probably struggling with experiencing healthy relationships.

Secondly, Jesus is revealed as our example in this story in that He made the preaching of the gospel front and center. The key statement that Jesus made in Mark 13:1-13 is found in verse 10. In the midst of tragedy, disaster, deception, and persecution Jesus tells His disciples what must happen before the end can come. Jesus uplifts the preaching of good news amidst all the bad news. In a world ravaged by bloodshed and murder people need to hear good news, amen?

I would like to spend the next few minutes, not so much trying to explain how to make the gospel front and center in your own lives, but to get you excited about the good news of the gospel.

The Greek word that the New Testament writers used and is translated, "gospel", in our Bibles carries a beautiful word picture. It's "euangelion" (pronounced oo-ang-el-ee-on). You can read this for yourself on the website Jesusradicals.com. In the Roman Empire evangelists would run through the land proclaiming that Caesar and his military had won a victory. This message was "euangelion". The problem with the Roman "euangelion", though, was that it was not good news for everyone. Those who were oppressed and defeated by the Romans did not find the evangelists' messages very thrilling.

More than anyone the Jews felt the sting of being under the rule of Rome. Rome's ultimate power was capital punishment. And their signature method of putting people to death was crucifixion. When Jesus was crucified, it seemed that even He had been defeated by the Romans. But when Jesus rose from the dead, He conquered not the Roman military. Better than that He conquered Caesar's most powerful weapon – death. Caesar no longer was supreme. Jesus became the theme of a new "euangelion". The good news of Jesus' victory went throughout the Roman Empire by 12 evangelists. Upon hearing this message, people were free to live as though Caesar had no power.

People today need to hear this new "euangelion". They need to hear of Christ's victory over Caesar nicotine, Caesar heroine, Caesar the abuser, Caesar pornography, Caesar depression, Caesar suffering, and ultimately Caesar death.

I imagine the disciples listened to Jesus' words in Mark 13 with some anxiety. Many here today may feel some anxiety about living in the last days before Christ returns. Hearing Jesus talk about deception, wars, natural disasters, and persecution can be disheartening. Who wants to go through all of that?

I will close with two thoughts that will hopefully encourage you. First, there's not a single disaster that Jesus mentioned that He didn't already experience. He has already walked the path and come out victorious. Second, Jesus has promised to walk that path again with you and me. He does not expect us to walk alone. Here's a Scripture I want to leave with you: Romans 8:35-37. (Read) Paul says that in Christ we are not just victorious. "We are more than conquerors."