

MARK 13

Mark 13:1–8. The Beginnings of Sorrows

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 671–681.

By any measure, the temple complex was an impressive structure. It was renowned across the Roman Empire for its scale and beauty. This disciple’s comment, however, misses the mark because he has failed to understand the importance of Jesus’s recent actions and teachings in the temple. Thus, Jesus begins to make explicit what He has only hinted at previously: the temple will soon be completely destroyed. This shocks the disciples—after all, the temple is supposed to be under divine protection. But Jesus’s prediction indicates that the divine presence has abandoned the structure, perhaps symbolized by His own departure in verse 1.

The disciples understandably assume that the temple’s destruction must then take place at the end of the world (“when shall these things be?”), and although these destructive periods are connected, Jesus will distinguish between the two in the warning speech that follows. Jesus’s warning of false messiahs in verse 6 would find its fulfillment in the coming decades as would-be saviors incited provocations against the Romans until full-scale war erupted in AD 66. The tribulation to come (presumably the First Jewish Revolt of AD 66–73) would result in the temple’s destruction and the renewed subjugation of the Jewish nation, yet in the context of the end-times trouble, it can only be called “the beginnings of sorrows.”

Mark 13:9–13. Trials for the Twelve

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 681–683.

With the adversative “but” (Greek *de*), the speech shifts focus to the disciples. Though wars will rage around them, they are to be concerned not with these but rather with the work of their ministry. Councils and synagogues refer to local Jewish institutions, while rulers and kings refer to Gentile authorities, suggesting the universality of the Apostles’ work and of the persecution they will face. Since “all nations” probably refers to the known world, this prophecy would have already been fulfilled by the time Mark’s Gospel was written. The Holy Ghost will help the Twelve, average men from unassuming backgrounds, stand with authority before the highest magistrates of their day.

Mark 13:14–23. Destruction of Jerusalem

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 683–689.

The abomination of desolation had, by Jesus’s day, come to be understood as a desecration of the temple. It is difficult to tell with certainty which event Jesus is referring to, but several occurrences that led up to the temple’s destruction may qualify. At any rate, the event is an imminent sign of coming destruction, and immediate flight is the only guarantee of safety. Some of the language is hyperbolic: the Jewish War would not have destroyed all humanity (verse 20), but the suffering endured by many was immense, and it was compounded by false messianic hopes (verses 21–22).

Mark 13:24–27. Coming of the Son of Man

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 689–691.

The time reference “in those days” is vague, making it unclear whether the following verses continue to discuss the destruction of Jerusalem or the later end of the world. The celestial signs enumerated in verses 24–25 would seem to indicate the end of the world; however, such imagery is often used in the Old Testament to symbolize turmoil and God’s intervention into human affairs. The reference to the coming of the Son of man quotes Daniel 7:13 and also points to an end-times reference, although the context in Daniel is a bit more complicated. The gathering in verse 27 refers to the missionary work of gathering Israel both in the time of the original Twelve as in the latter days.

Mark 13:28–37. The Timing of the Coming

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 691–699.

The final verses of the speech offer some cryptic clues about the timing of the spoken events. Fig trees come into leaf in spring, which signals the arrival of summer; similarly, the abomination of desolation surely precedes Jerusalem’s destruction. The reference to “this generation” suggests either that Jesus is referring to the destruction of the temple, which would occur within the lifetime of most of His audience, or that “generation” has some sort of symbolic meaning if Jesus is referring to the end of days.

The context of the last verses of the chapter strongly indicates that Jesus is speaking about the end of days and His Second Coming. It is perhaps surprising that Jesus indicates that He is not aware of the time of His return, but this revelation emphasizes that the Son acts in accordance with His Father’s plan. The point of His parable is that despite the warning signs, Jesus’s return will be surprising and unexpected for those who are not actively anticipating it. The only way to ensure that we are ready for that moment is to be ready continually—not by obsessing over signs but by cautiously guarding our actions.

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