Mark Lesson 45 (2023)

**UNTIL THE FINAL AND GLORIOUS DAY**

Mark 13:1-37

Key Verse: 13:26-27

“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.’

Today’s passage is one of the most challenging passages in the Bible and is the most extended section of Jesus’ teaching in Mark’s Gospel. This chapter is often called the “*Olivet Discourse*” because it was given to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. In his lengthy speech, Jesus predicted the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the signs of the end times, and his glorious second coming. Since his discourse is mainly about what would happen in the future, it’s confusing and difficult to understand this passage correctly. However, we should not miss Jesus’ promise of his glorious second coming as the culmination of human history. “*Do you think Jesus’ coming is very close? What will it be like when he comes again? How should we then live?”* Let’s open our hearts to the message Jesus has for us today.

***First, the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (1-4).*** Look at verse 1. “As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!’” There is no trace of the Jerusalem Temple today. So, it’s hard to know precisely what this temple looked like. According to Josephus, a Jewish historian in the first century, the Jerusalem Temple was considered one of the world's architectural wonders of the time. Of course, it was not Solomon’s temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians in the seventh century B.C. (2 Kings 25:8-10). Ezra rebuilt it after Israel returned from exile in the sixth century B.C. Then, it was again desecrated by the Seleucids in the second century B.C., reconstructed by the Maccabees soon afterward, and enormously expanded by King Herod the Great. Herod’s temple was impressive, covering about one-sixth of the land area of the ancient city of Jerusalem. It was not just one building but a majestic mixture of porches, colonnades, separate small towers, and courts surrounding the temple (Pic#1 & 2). To the Jews, the Jerusalem temple meant a lot. It meant more than just the beauty and the vast scale of the temple building. It represented God’s presence among them and Israel’s identity.

It was Jesus’ last visit to the temple area. He would soon be arrested and crucified for the sins of the world in a couple of days. Yet, his disciples were not aware of it. Instead, looking at the gorgeous temple buildings, the disciples might have anticipated that Jesus would start his earthly messianic kingdom at the Jerusalem Temple. As Jesus was leaving the temple area, one of them remarked on the incredible beauty of the temple. *“Teacher, look at these magnificent buildings! Look at the impressive stones on the walls!”*

Look at verse 2. “‘Do you see all these great buildings?’ replied Jesus. ‘Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.’” Jesus acknowledged the majestic buildings. Yet, to their surprise, Jesus stated that these magnificent buildings would be demolished. Throughout history, the Jerusalem temple had been destroyed and rebuilt. Then again, Jesus predicted that Jerusalem and the beautiful temple buildings would be destroyed again. This happened a few decades later when the Roman army ransacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Look at verses 3 and 4. “As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?’” The temple symbolized God’s presence among them. The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple meant the destruction of their nation. After all, it meant that the physical building of the Temple was no longer a place where God would dwell. The collapse of the Jerusalem Temple was horrifying and unimaginable. However, it begins a new era/age that the actual temple is not a building but Jesus himself. That’s what Jesus meant when he said to the Jewish leaders earlier, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” (Jn. 2:19) Moreover, our body is God’s temple, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and God’s dwelling place. (1 Cor. 6:19-20) What does it tell us? What truly matters is our personal relationship with Jesus Christ, not significant buildings or big organizations.

Stunned by Jesus’ prediction, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, *“Tell us, when will all this happen? What sign will show us that these things are about to be fulfilled?”* (Pic#2CD) When we think about their questions, we find that they regarded the temple's destruction as the end of the present age. Their questions led Jesus to a lengthy discourse.

***Second, Signs of the End Times (5-25)*** In verses 5-25, Jesus gave many warning signs that could alert his followers and panic. But when we carefully examine them, we know that most of them are not actual signs of the end of the age, except one. Let’s go through them: [1] The appearance of the false messiahs and false prophets (5-6; 21-23), [2] Wars and rumors of wars and international conflicts (7-8a), [3] natural disasters, such as frequent earthquakes and famines (8b), [4] persecutions by the government authorities (9-11), [5] extreme family conflicts due to Christian faith (12), [6] the coming of the Anti-Christian area (13), [7] followed by the abomination in God’s holy place before the destruction of the temple and [8] the arrival of the time of the unbearable distress (14-23).

The three years of the pandemic put the world's people in discomfort, excessive distress, and pain. Now, after the pandemic, we are still facing many other challenges, including climate change through global heating. With the frequency of hurricanes, wildfires, unprecedented floods, wars, and international conflicts, many of us feel that the world is no longer a safe and permanent dwelling place for us and that the end is coming soon. Panic? But wait!

While talking about these things, Jesus clarified that those are not the signs that indicate the immediate end of the present world. Instead, he said it’s just the beginning of the birth pains. Look at verse 8. “Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.” “The beginning of the birth pains” means the first of the birth pains, with more to come. I am not familiar with birth pains. However, through my wife’s experience during her pregnancy, I noticed that the frequency and severity of birth pains increase as the baby's delivery comes across. It indicates that our situation on this planet won’t necessarily be better.

One of the most significant challenges before the end of time is the rise of deception of false messiahs. The deception may be from a religious viewpoint and every aspect of life. It’s a time of confusion and deception. Unless we hold on to the truth of God, it’s easy to be deceived and tempted to abandon our faith and compromise due to fear and anxiety.

Jesus knew our vulnerability, agony, and pains during the spiritual birth pain period in this world. So, he said many encouraging words. Let’s read them one by one. He said in verse 5, “Jesus said to them, ‘Watch out that no one deceives you.” He said in verse 9a, “You must be on your guard,” and verse 23, “So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead.” Jesus said in verse 11b, “Do not worry beforehand,” in verse 13, “Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved,” and in verse 18, “Pray that this will not take place in winter.”

Jesus did not want his followers to remain in fear and become helpless while facing challenges and trials. So, he encouraged them to stay faithful, promising that he would be with them in their trials and challenges through the Spirit. He also encouraged them to use every situation as an opportunity to share the good news of the kingdom of heaven, even when they are in prison.

One of the primary reasons we go through the challenges in this world is to spread the good news of God’s kingdom and mature our faith as his chosen people – God’s elects. We can effectively witness the gospel when we depend on the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us. Therefore, as God’s chosen people, we must learn to walk with the Holy Spirit daily. It reminds us of what Apostle Paul said in Galatians 5:16, “So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

Then, what is the sure sign of the end times that we cannot and should not miss? It’s the disruption in the celestial phenomena. Look at verses 24-25. “But in those days, following that distress, ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’” What Jesus said here is a quotation from Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4. It’s not just solar eclipses or lunar eclipses that often occur. It’s a complete shake of the entire universe. (Pic#3) If that happens, everything will be shattered. It’s scary, but we don’t need to worry. Why not? It’s because the glorious coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will immediately follow the disruption of the universe.

***Third, the Return of the Son of Man (26-31).*** Let’s read verses 26 and 27. “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of that heavens.” Amid the birth pains of trials and excessive distress, Jesus gives us hope. The glorious return of Jesus the Messiah will be an unprecedented event that will rise above all human history. When that day comes, everyone will see Christ Jesus coming on the clouds with great power and glory.

When Jesus came first into the world, he came as a helpless baby. His life on earth started in a humble manger and ended on the cross, offering his life and blood as a ransom sacrifice for the sins of the world. His Second Coming will be different. He will come as King of kings and Lord of lords. And he will send his angels to gather his chosen ones from worldwide, calling their names individually. He will wipe their tears from our eyes, and we will rejoice greatly. We notice that in his discourse, Jesus uses the words “his elect,” which means *“his chosen people.”* (23, 27) We are chosen not because of what we have done but because of God’s mercy. God showed his mercy on us. Amazing grace!

To highlight the certainty of his return, Jesus spoke the parable of the fig tree in verses 28-31: “Now learn the lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it’s near, right at the door. Truly, I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” The certainty of Christ’s return contrasts with the uncertainty of worldly events. It reminds us that our ultimate hope is not in this world but in the eternal promise of God. The glorious coming of the Son of Man is our anchor, assurance, and destination.

Jesus concludes his lengthy teaching by saying that the day of his return is secret. Look at verse 32. “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” It’s hard to understand why Jesus said the day of his return is secret. He said that he does not know the day of his return. How is it possible that he, the Son of God, would not know the time of his return? Many people try to speculate about it. Some say that Jesus knew it but was humble and didn’t want to brag about it. I am not sure about that. Or it may be true that Jesus himself does not know. We don’t know. By the way, wouldn’t it be better if Jesus said when he would return? What do you think? But what does the unknown day of his return mean to us? My best guess is that it’s open-ended and can happen anytime, today, next year, or a thousand years later. I would call it “a divine puzzle or a mystery.”

In verses 33-37, Jesus explains why the day of his return is a secret. “Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore, keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

The story of the owner of the house teaches us that by not disclosing the exact time of his return, we are encouraged to maintain a constant state of readiness and faith. In other words, we are encouraged to live in a manner that aligns with our faith at all times, as if the return of Jesus could happen at any moment. It also enables us to avoid complacency and develop faithfulness and accountability. Therefore, spiritually speaking, it’s much better for us not to know the exact time of his return because it can maximize the spiritual effect on our transformation. At the same time, we may be fully ready for his glorious return.

Next year, I will be seventy, the retirement age. I may be retired from my post as a pastor, but *“Can I be retired from the task God has given me and spiritual struggle?”* Of course not. There is no retirement for doing God’s work. May I not be complacent but run the race of my faith until either the final day of my life or Jesus’ Glorious Second Coming.

On that glorious day, Christ Jesus will reward us according to what we have done. He will complete his work of redemption in his power and glory, and we will be transformed into his glorious image. We need to ask ourselves, *“Is my life aligned with the truth of His Second Coming?”* May we not be complacent and always be ready to complete the task given to us. Let us run the race of our faith to the end until the final and glorious day.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father. As we reflect on the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and signs of the end times, help us remember that our ultimate hope is in Christ Jesus and our personal relationship with him. May we not be deceived by false messiahs or distracted by worldly events but keep our eyes fixed on you. Lord, in these challenging times, when the world is filled with trials and distress, grant us strength to stand firm in our faith. Help us walk daily with the Holy Spirit, relying on your guidance and wisdom. We are so grateful for the promise of Christ’s return, a day when all tears will be wiped away, and we will rejoice in his presence. Lord, keep us watching and ready for that day, whether it comes in our lifetime or in generations to come. May we live our lives in alignment with the truth of Christ’s Second Coming, not in complacency but in active faithfulness, always ready to fulfill the tasks you have assigned to us. Help us run the race of our faith until the final and glorious day when we shall see our Lord Jesus Christ face to face. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen