

Discipleship According to Mark

The Sign of Things to Come (Mark 13:1-23)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at Houston Chinese Church on August 30, 2026

Introduction

- ❖ There are few theological topics that generate as much interest and fascination among Christians than the topic of the end times. So many books and seminars and conferences have been dedicated to the careful study of the Scriptures to ascertain a detailed timeline and sequence of events pertaining to the end of the world.
 - ▶ Many Christians get really excited about connecting the dots. They scan the headlines. They react to global events. They identify world leaders. Looking for a pattern. **Like reading tea leaves, they try to explain the signs of the times.** Is this guy the antichrist? Is that conflict in the Middle East a fulfillment of this prophecy? Has the Tribulation already begun? Are we in the end times?
- ❖ Those who get really into this topic usually turn to a few key passages in Scripture. The book of Revelation, of course. 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Daniel chapters 7-12. **And then there's the Olivet Discourse.** That's our passage—where Jesus has a discourse with some of his disciples while on the Mount of Olives. Similar accounts of this discourse are found in Matthew 24 and Luke 21.
 - ▶ The Olivet Discourse in Mark 13 is a pretty challenging text to interpret. Which makes it that much more difficult to preach. **There's a lot of historical background that we'll need to raise for you to get the overall context.** And there's no way we're going to resolve all the theological disagreements over this text.
- ❖ To give you a snapshot of the debate, picture it like this. **On one end of the spectrum are those who argue that everything Jesus predicted in the Olivet Discourse has already been fulfilled in the first-century.** Especially during the First Jewish-Roman War that began in 66AD and ended in 70AD with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The argument is that Mark is recording the teachings of Jesus—not for some future audience living centuries and millennia later—but for *his* first-century audience. For those who need to be on guard for what lies ahead, especially in that decisive year of 70AD.
 - ▶ **On the other end of the spectrum are those who argue that almost everything here awaits a future, ultimate fulfillment in the end times.** In those brief, tumultuous years of Tribulation right before the Second Coming. Even if there are a few historical reference points here in Mark 13, they'd argue that this chapter was largely written to prepare the future Church for a future, end times fulfillment.
- ❖ **But then there's another viewpoint—that I resonate with—that's somewhere in the middle of the two.** That sees much of what's taught in vv1-23 (our passage) as having already been fulfilled by 70AD. While vv24-37 (next week's verses) have a more future-orientation, referring to the Second Coming of Christ.
 - ▶ So for the predictions in our passage—when Jesus taught them and when Mark recorded them (assuming he wrote his Gospel before 70AD, a point most scholars agree with)—that means these were still predictions at the time. They're still prophetic. But within a span of forty years, by 70AD, these verses were fulfilled. That's how we'll approach this text.

- ❖ But even this mediating position can still argue that certain concepts taught in vv1-23—like an “*abomination of desolation*” or a time of “*tribulation*” with increased persecution and false teaching—this position can teach that, while these concepts had a near fulfillment in 70AD, they can still point to future events to come at the end of the age.
 - ▶ Which means we’re not just reading ancient history. **Which means this morning’s passage—though it was written to particular Christians for a particular time and place—these verses are still relevant to us.** There’s still useful application here for all Christians at any time point in history.
- ❖ So while I may not be reading today’s passage looking for helpful information to predict details of the end times, **I am reading it for helpful encouragement to endure the challenges of our present time.** Because just like in those days, we’re still dealing with false messiahs and false teaching; with wars and rumors of wars; with earthquakes and famines; with increased opposition and persecution; with trials and tribulations. **So much of what’s referenced in this text is still happening in this world, so Jesus’s command to “*be on your guard,*” is just as needed now as it was back then.**
 - ▶ So as we walk through our text, let me highlight three warnings from Jesus. (1) A warning against end times fever because of our susceptibility to deception. (2) A warning of increased persecution and our propensity to despair. (3) A warning of coming tribulation and our responsibility to prepare.

A Warning Against End Times Fever

- ❖ The first thing we come across in Mark 13 is **Jesus’s warning to his disciples against getting caught up in end times fever because of their susceptibility to deception.** This is in vv1-8. As they were leaving the temple, a disciple says, “*“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.”*”
 - ▶ The disciple who spoke up goes unnamed. **It matters little to identify him since I’m sure he spoke for them all.** The others were just smart enough to keep that same thought to themselves. They heard what Jesus said about the temple the other day. He called it a “*den of thieves.*” Not too smart to ooh and ahh the next day over its wonderful stones and buildings.
 - **But I bet all the disciples were awed by the temple’s external beauty and grandeur.** It was one of the unofficial wonders of the ancient world. The first temple (Solomon’s temple) was destroyed back in 586BC by the Babylonians. It was rebuilt 70 years later by the Jews who returned from the Exile.
- ❖ It was later to be known as the Second Temple or Herod’s Temple. **Because Herod the Great had begun a major renovation project of the Second Temple that still wasn’t done by Jesus’s day.** It had been going on for over 50 years. During that time, the temple grounds were significantly expanded to 35-acres. It was big enough to fit twelve football fields.

- ❖ **The Royal Portico**—the area where Jesus had driven out the merchants and moneychangers—was added by Herod. It was over 900 feet long and contained four rows of forty columns holding up a massive ornate roof. Each column was 40 feet tall and so thick that it took three men with outstretched arms, touching fingertips, to encircle just one column.
 - ▶ **When it came to the temple building itself, ancient historians describe its outward face as gilded with golden plates.** The temple faced the East, so each morning, when the sun rose, it would reflect off the temple face so brightly that you had to divert your eyes. It was just too bright.
 - And those wonderful stones the disciple was pointing to, they were probably the ones that comprised the temple itself. One ancient historian, who saw it with his own eyes, described them as being over 60 feet in length, 7.5 feet in height, and 9 feet in depth. Those temple stones were unbelievably massive!
- ❖ That's what the disciples were gawking at as they walked out of the temple grounds. And probably to their utter shock, they hear Jesus predict the temple's destruction. **Those massive stones will somehow be thrown down and strewn everywhere.**
 - ▶ But that should've been no surprise to the disciples. They were there when Jesus cleansed the temple. They were there when he cursed the fig tree, which represented the temple. And now they're there as Jesus "*came out of the temple*," walks out of the Eastern gate, crosses the Kidron valley, and walks up the Mount of Olives, which rises three hundred feet above Jerusalem directly to the east of the temple.
- ❖ **Anyone in those days familiar with the prophetic writings would've recognized an allusion to Ezekiel 11.** Where the glory of the LORD abandons the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The text says, "*And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.*" Referring to the Mount of Olives.
 - ▶ So Jesus is sending a signal when he leaves the city and sits down in judgment "*on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple.*" (v3) The disciples see a beautiful temple with awe-inspiring architecture. They fail to see behind the veil. They fail to see the temple's spiritual barrenness and God's judicial abandonment of it.
- ❖ **And then the disciples make the mistake of closely tying the destruction of the Jerusalem temple to the end times.** They still assume that the temple has a central place in the worship of God, so they can't fathom how the world can go on without it. **In their understanding, to predict the end of the temple is to predict the end of time.**
 - ▶ So Peter, James, John, and Andrew privately ask Jesus (look at v4), "*Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?*" They ask for a sign, so they can prepare for this catastrophe—for the end of time and the final judgment to come.
 - And Jesus's response is interesting. He doesn't really answer their first question of *when*. At least not in terms of giving them a date or a span of time to wait. But he does address the second question.

- ❖ Jesus gives them signs. **None are signs that signal the immediate end of time.** He even says, in v7, not to be alarmed when these signs occur. They have to take place, “*but the end is not yet.*” However, there is one sign—that we’ll look at in v14—that does signal when the destruction of the temple is about to be accomplished.
 - ▶ But notice, in vv5-8, Jesus is *not* giving his disciples the information they *want* to predict the future. **Instead, he’s giving them what they *need* to endure the present.** They *need* to be aware of these large-scale events on the horizon. Which he predicts will be used by false teachers to try to lead them astray. To get his disciples caught up in end times fever thinking the end is nigh.
 - Look at v5, “⁵*Jesus began to say to them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁸For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.”*
- ❖ **Their desire for a sign—their want to know *when*—makes them susceptible to deception.** They’re more vulnerable when false messiahs arrive, claiming to be the second coming of Christ. These false teachers will point to catastrophic events like global wars and natural disasters and make exaggerated claims that these things signal the end of time.
 - ▶ Jesus says, “**These events won’t just take place at the end of time. They must take place throughout time.** They’re but the beginning of the birth pains.” When a mother starts feeling the birth pains, that doesn’t signal the end of labor but the beginning.
 - **Now with that analogy, Jesus is not suggesting that the end of time is merely a matter of months away.** He’s saying that well before the ends arrives, you can expect some pain. You can expect false messiahs to show up claiming to be me and pointing to such events as signs of the end. Don’t be alarmed. Be on guard.
- ❖ **You can pick up a newspaper, turn on the TV, get on social media, and you’ll be inundated with news about wars and rumors of wars.** In Iran, or Gaza, or Ukraine, etc. And you’ll read reports and see videos of devastating earthquakes in Venezuela or Columbia or about flash floods in Nepal. And you’ll have plenty of false teachers claiming that these are reliable signs of the end of the world. That the end times are here.
 - ▶ **But Jesus’s point is that no one knows based on these signs alone.** These things have been going on since the first century. He’s warning us to be skeptical of our own ability to spot the signs of the times and to be aware of our susceptibility to deception.
 - **His point is *not* to ask *when* these things will happen but how will you react when they inevitably do?** Because not only will the birth pains involve large-scale events but also personal attacks and persecution. How will you react when it affects you personally? Will you wilt under pressure and succumb to the temptation to avoid suffering by denying Christ?

A Warning of Increased Persecution

- ❖ This leads to the second warning I wanted to highlight in the text—a **warning of increased persecution and our propensity to despair**. Just as we shouldn't be surprised by disturbing events taking place in the world, we shouldn't be surprised by disturbing attacks against our faith whether by those authorities above you or by those closest to you.
 - ▶ Look at v9, “*9But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them.*” **Those predictions were quickly fulfilled in the book of Acts**. The apostles were dragged before the Sanhedrin and beaten. Paul stood before governors and kings to bear witness of Christ and his gospel.
 - And that was just the start. **From the beginning, the Church has been under constant pressure and persecution**. In 64 AD, when the Great Fire of Rome destroyed much of the city, Nero falsely blamed it on Christians. Fanning the flames of opposition against them that had been lit by other false accusations.
- ❖ In the first century, Christians were **accused of incest**. Because when they celebrated the Lord's Supper, they called it an *agape* feast, a love feast (cf. Jude 1:12). But from early on, there was a nasty rumor going around that these love feasts were incestuous orgies—because Christians kept calling each other brother and sister.
 - ▶ And in these love feasts, they were also **accused of cannibalism** since they would repeat these words that suggested they were eating the flesh and blood of their Master. And ironically, the early Christians were **labeled as atheists** since they denied the entire Roman Pantheon of gods and goddesses. And they were **accused of sedition** against the emperor since they claimed to follow another king.
 - So if you think Christians today have a bad reputation, just remember that early Christians were viewed by the general public as a seditious, incestuous, blood-thirsty, atheistic cult. And yet they didn't play the victim card. They didn't gripe or complain. Nor did they despair.
- ❖ Because Jesus had already warned them of these things to come. Not to help them predict the timing of the end times but to help them endure persecution. In the remaining verses, Jesus encourages by explaining the **purpose** of the increased persecution; by offering a **promise** as we undergo the persecution; and by issuing a call for **perseverance** in the persecution.
- ❖ **Consider, first, the purpose of the increased persecution**. Jesus said it at the end of v9, “*to bear witness before them* (the councils, governors, and kings). ¹⁰*And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.*” So in other words, the pressure and persecution is coming—not to give you signs of the end times—but to give you opportunities to proclaim the gospel. Especially to particular individuals in unique positions to change and shape culture.
 - ▶ Now v10 has been interpreted to suggest that we can predict the timing of the end based on our progress in evangelizing all nations, all people groups in the world. But again, I don't think timing is Jesus's point. **His point is that our preaching of the gospel to all nations will take place in the context of increased persecution**.

- ❖ **The remaining unreached people groups of the world are located in places that are hard to reach—filled with people whose hearts are even harder.** They don't want you in their country evangelizing. They're not inviting you to come and preach the gospel. They might arrest you, deport you, or even kill you if you try. But the gospel must be proclaimed to all nations. Be on guard that it will only take place in the context of increased persecution.
- ❖ **But there's also a promise as we undergo this persecution.** Jesus promises the Holy Spirit. Do not be anxious for he will be there with you in the trial—to guide you and supply you with the very words to speak. Listen to v11, *“And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, 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.”*
 - ▶ Jesus doesn't promise to rescue you out of the trial, but he does promise to help you in it. To help you fulfill persecution's purpose by empowering you to proclaim the gospel. **The Spirit is sent—not for divine deliverance—but for divine help.** That you might faithfully and clearly explain to your adversary why you hope in Christ.
- ❖ You're going to need the Spirit's help, especially if that adversary is a close family member. That's what Jesus alludes to in v12. **Even your own family might persecute and oppose your faith.** He says in v13, *“And you will be hated by all for my name's sake.”*
 - ▶ This is a prediction (call it a promise) that all believers must come to grips with. **If you tend to be a people pleaser, it's not going to be easy for you dealing with the hate.** But as long as it's not your behavior or attitude that draws the hate—as long as it's directed at your faith and hope in Christ—then you have—not *what* it takes—but *who* it takes to endure it. You have the Holy Spirit in you.
- ❖ **And that leads to Jesus's call for perseverance as we endure the increased persecution.** Look at the end of v13, *“But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”* Your endurance will be strengthened by your hope. Your hope of what is to come. Of your future salvation.
 - ▶ These verses may not help you predict the future. But they certainly point to the future. Because knowing that your future is secure—knowing that it includes *“the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory”* (v26)—that makes all the difference. That helps you persevere. That helps you not despair.
- ❖ **Pointless pain is impossible to endure.** But that's why it's so helpful that Jesus compared all of this pain and suffering to birth pains. **Childbirth involves great agony for the mother, but the joy of holding her newborn in her tired arms makes it worth it.**
 - ▶ So just picture when the birth pains begin and the contractions are still far apart. So she's still at home not ready to go the hospital. The end is still a long way off. And she knows the pain will only increase. **But what makes the labor endurable is the blessed hope of a child to come.**
 - **In the same way, what makes life in a world of increased persecution endurable is the blessed hope of Jesus's Second Coming.** That's where Mark 13 points us to in the second half, starting in v24.

A Warning of Coming Tribulation

- ❖ But before we go there next week, let's see vv14-23 and Jesus's third warning. Here Jesus is pointing, in one sense, not as far as the Second Coming but to a nearer event. But in another sense, you could say he still has a future end times fulfillment in mind. It's a both-and position. **Let's see the warning of coming tribulation and our responsibility to prepare.**
- ❖ I think it's clear that Jesus is issuing a warning to his immediate audience. Not to some future generation of the Church. **His immediate audience would be the ones who are actually living in Judea.** They could actually flee to the mountains when this tribulation arrives. Listen to v14, "*But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.*"
 - ▶ **Jesus goes on to say when you see this particular sign—this abomination of desolation— then make a beeline for the mountains.** Don't go back inside the house for your things. Don't turn back for your cloak. Just leave. Pray for pregnant women and nursing mothers when that day arrives. Pray that it won't take place mid-winter. Listen to v19, "*For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be.*"
 - Here Jesus is directly answering their second question about that sign of when the temple's destruction is about to be accomplished. He's referring to the tribulation the inhabitants of Judea will endure during the Jewish-Roman War (66AD-70AD). And the particular sign signaling the imminent destruction of the temple is this "*abomination of desolation.*"
- ❖ **Mark includes that parenthetical statement in v14, "(let the reader understand)," because he can assume that his ancient readers, steeped in the OT, would recognize the reference to Daniel 9:27.** Where the concept of an abomination of desolation is first mentioned and predicted to, one day, be set up in the temple in place of the regular burnt offerings (Dan 11:31; 12:11). It would be something that greatly offends God's people. Something so detestable that it causes the temple to be abandoned—to be made desolate.
 - ▶ **Now in the span of history, most commentators would say that Daniel's prophecy was initially fulfilled by Antiochus IV.** He was a Greek ruler who, in 167BC, brutally persecuted the Jews and attacked the city of Jerusalem. Now in order to suppress their faith, Antiochus stopped the Jews from conducting their daily sacrifices; introduced pagan worship; and had unclean animals including pigs sacrificed on the altar of God. To top it off, he dedicated the temple to Zeus.
- ❖ So when Mark's original audience heard "*abomination of desolation,*" 167BC was the historical reference point that they would've had in mind. **But when Jesus said it, he was pointing to another reference point. He's pointing forward to 70AD.** And he's pointing forward to a male figure. That's what the grammar in the original Greek would suggest. That's why the ESV translates it as, "*when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be.*"

- ❖ **So Jesus is saying to be on guard—to be on the lookout—for when the abomination of desolation stands, once again, in the temple where he does not belong.** Then you know to get out of Jerusalem. To abandon the temple and head for the hills.
 - ▶ Now historically, Jesus could've been talking about the Roman soldiers who ransacked the temple when Jerusalem fell. They entered the grounds bearing their standards with a Roman eagle emblazoned on them, which Jews considered an idolatrous symbol. Or maybe he was referring to Titus, the Roman general who led the campaign and profaned the temple itself by entering inside. The exact reference point is debatable. **But you could say the prophecy initially fulfilled by Antiochus in 167BC was recast by Jesus and fulfilled by Titus in 70AD.**

- ❖ **But even these historical fulfillments can still be viewed as types that point to events that lie ahead in our future.** To a future end times period of tribulation. Or to a future antichrist figure who blasphemously positions himself where he ought not to be, proclaiming to be God (2 Thess 2:3-4).
 - ▶ **So Jesus's warnings in our text are just as relevant for the Church today.** Like his warning in v22, where he says false messiahs and false prophets will continue to *"arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect."* But that's not possible because God's chosen people are secure in his sovereign hands.
 - And yet, while it's not possible for his elect to go astray, Jesus goes on in v23 to stress our responsibility to prepare. *"But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand."*

- ❖ In other words, we don't—and we won't—know when the Son of God returns and when the end will come. **But that just makes it all the more urgent that we stay alert and be on guard and prepare ourselves and our families for when he comes.**
 - ▶ When Jesus comes, he won't be asking to see our timelines to see whose predictions came closest. **He'll be asking what we were up to as we awaited his return.** Were we proclaiming the gospel to all nations? Were we enduring persecution in faithfulness? Were we suffering for Jesus with joy? That's how we prepare for the things to come.

- ❖ And if you're not yet a Christian, you can prepare for the end by going back to the beginning of our chapter. And meditate on the reason why the temple was abandoned and destroyed. **Because the meeting place with God is no longer a building but a Person. Because the forgiveness of our sins for all eternity was secured—not on an altar—but on a Cross.** So if you go to God through the Person of Jesus Christ and trust in his death for you on the cross—you'll be prepared for the end whenever that day arrives.