

I. Introduction

About a week ago, I read a Times Magazine article about our AI future and the eschatology of AI companies. I was surprised the article used a theological word: “eschatology,” which refers to the study of last things (like final judgment, end times, heaven and hell, etc.). The author wrote: “Everyone has a vision of the ultimate future, some picture of what the world looks like at its best (or worst)...” That vision, or your eschatology, “shapes your ethics, because what you believe is coming determines what you feel obligated to do today.”

Well today, we continue our study of Mark 13, which touches on eschatology, or last things. It is a difficult chapter to understand, and when you read it, you get a sense that it has both past and future aspects to it, which can be confusing. What makes it even more perplexing is that Jesus is using Daniel as his template. Daniel’s prophecies are notoriously challenging to interpret.

Recall that the disciples are gawking at the splendor of the temple when Jesus shockingly says it will be destroyed. Jesus’ inner circle (Peter, James and John) not surprisingly ask him when will this catastrophe happen. And in reply, Jesus gives his longest answer to any question posed to him; his reply is commonly known as the Olivet Discourse.¹

Jesus’ Olivet Discourse touches on the temple’s destruction, but also goes far beyond it. That’s because in Jesus’ day, **the end of the temple was bound up with the end times**. In Matthew 24:3, the question posed to Jesus is not only “*when will these things be*,” referring to the temple’s destruction, but also “*what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*” The disciples knew that in Daniel, temple desecration or destruction was tied with the arrival of the end times.

As mentioned, **Daniel is the framework of Mark 13**. Jesus is interpreting and applying Daniel’s prophecies, in particular chapters 7, 9, 11 and 12. Daniel provides the prophetic material that Jesus uses to predict the near coming destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, while simultaneously pointing beyond it to the ultimate coming of the Son of Man in the future.

Both Daniel and Jesus adopt something called “**prophetic telescoping**,” which views historical fulfillment of prophecy in the near future as foreshadowing the ultimate fulfillment of such prophecy in the end times. A telescope causes a faraway object to appear closer. So, prophetic telescoping, this historic to ultimate fulfillment of prophecy, is like seeing a distant mountain range; one peak seems to rise right behind another. Yet as you get closer to peak no. 1, you see how much distance is actually between peak no. 1 and peak no. 2. Peak no. 1 is the near historical horizon, where there is initial fulfillment of prophecy, while peak no. 2 is the ultimate horizon, when the prophecy reaches its final and complete fulfillment. The distance between the two peaks is the time that elapses between the two fulfillments.²

All of this is important background as we dive into this morning’s text. I believe Mark 13 reflects prophetic telescoping, so it is a mix of both historic and future events. The coming judgment and destruction of

¹ It could be seen as Jesus’ farewell discourse, akin to Jacob (Gen 49), Moses (Dt 32-33), Samuel (1 Sam 12) and Paul (Acts 20).

² Prophetic telescoping occurs, for instance in Isaiah 7-9, when he speaks a virgin conceiving and bearing a son. The immediate future fulfillment concerns King Ahaz and Judah, but its ultimate fulfillment concerns the coming Messiah (as Matthew notes in his birth narrative). Another example is Ezekiel 36-37, where the promises of a cleansing from sin, a new heart, giving of God’s Spirit, and vision of dry bones coming to life has immediate historical fulfillment in the restoration of Israel after her exile. But the imagery points toward greater eschatological restoration associated with the end times.

Jerusalem, culminating in 70 AD (as mentioned earlier in Mark 13), becomes a historical prototype of the final judgment that will occur at Jesus' return. In short, our Lord is saying, "I predict what will happen in the near future concerning the temple. When those things happen, then believe also what I predict about the ultimate future – about my return."

The **problem we face today though is that many believers ignore the ultimate future**. The last things take a back seat to everyday Christian living when it should be the very opposite. For only when you know your future destination can you journey daily in the right direction in the present. We ignore eschatology to our peril.

Which is why this passage is about one important and simple idea: **stay awake!** Jesus calls us to stay awake because he *will* return one day. My message is divided into three parts, which all branch from that central theme: stay awake. I want to show you how the text calls us to stay awake because of the certainty, nearness, and suddenness of Christ's return. Again, why must we stay awake? It's because of the certainty, nearness, and suddenness of Christ's return.

II. Stay Awake because of the Certainty of Jesus' Return (vv 24-27)

First, we are to stay awake because of the certainty of Jesus' return. Look again at **verses 24 to 25**: "*But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*"

In these two verses, Jesus stitches a patchwork of many Old Testament passages about the Day of the Lord and the coming judgment. I don't have time to go through all of them, but please jot them down and be a Berean by looking these up and confirming what I say. Isaiah 13, Ezekiel 32, Joel 2 to 3, are all covered by Jesus' vivid description here.³

But it is evident that this cosmic imagery is about something that supersedes history. Stars, which were often seen to influence human affairs, are "falling from heaven," which means all powers, real or imagined, will succumb. The "*powers in the heavens will be shaken.*" The celestial bodies will not give their light. Darkness will again envelope the earth like in Creation, when "*darkness was over the face of the deep*" (Gen 1:2). These cosmic signs set an awe-inspiring and surreal stage for the coming of the Son of Man.

Illustration: I've seen two total solar eclipses in my life so far, and each time, it's been one of the most remarkable experiences of my life. Also, I remember weird things happening. First, there was unusual animal behavior, I remember how birds suddenly got quiet, but then crickets started chirping in the middle of the day. Second, there were strange weather changes. I recall the temperature dropping, clouds dissipating, the air getting very still, and also this amazing color shift where the landscape took on this metallic yellowish glow.

These weird things were signs that something extraordinary was about to happen. And when the moon actually blocked out the sun, even more beautiful and astonishing things happened. The sun's corona was still visible behind the moon, creating this white "ring of fire." Everyone was looking up. People were in awe. As magical as totality was though, inevitably, the moon had to give way to the sun. Darkness gave way to light. The moment the moon started to shift away, breaking totality, there was a "diamond ring" effect where a bright spark of light suddenly appeared. It was the sun shining forth once again! Friends, this is like the return of Christ! Nothing can eclipse the Son's return. His glory will shine forth like a glittering diamond, unmistakable to all who see it.

³ More specifically: Is 13:10, 34:4; Ezek 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 3:4, 15. See also, Rev 6:12-14, 8:12.

And that is what **verse 26** says: “*And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.*” The phrase “coming in clouds” comes from Daniel 7:13-14, where he prophesied about the coming Messiah, the Son of Man, appearing to the Ancient of Days at the moment of worst despair. It is an example of prophetic telescoping where Christ’s heavenly reign following his first coming fulfills those verses on a near future horizon, but his visible return in glory at his second coming fulfills them on the ultimate horizon.

Clouds or smoke often symbolized the presence and glory of God (Ex 16:10, 19:9, 24:15-16, 33:9; Lev 16:2, Num 11:25; Is 6:4). The Shekinah glory of God, which came in a cloud, filled the tabernacle in Exodus 40, and Solomon’s temple in 1 Kings 8. But since Jesus will replace the temple as the meeting place with God, he will return “in clouds” because he is now the manifest presence of God. He is the “radiance of the glory of God” (Heb 1:3), possessing “glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

And what will Jesus do when he returns? Let’s read **verse 27**: “*And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*” Jesus gathers all his own from everywhere! The elect, who are all who have true faith, converge on a single point, Jesus. The angels bring the elect to Jesus. He has come for his own, as he says in John 14:3: “*I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*”

Beloved, from this first section, aside from the certainty of Christ’s return, I want you to also see two other things: the reality and importance of it. First, the **reality of Jesus’ return**. Jesus fulfilled at least 300 distinct prophecies during his earthly ministry and first advent, such as when, how and where he was to be born, what he would do, how he was to die and for what purpose, what his disciples would do, his resurrection, etc. If he happened to fulfill 1, 2 or 3 prophecies, then I’d dismiss that as a mere coincidence. But, 300? The odds of that happening by chance are basically mathematically impossible. Since the Bible so comprehensively and accurately predicted the first coming of Jesus, we can trust it to do the same with his second coming, of which there are even more prophecies than the first.⁴ The reality of Jesus’ return is irrefutable.

Second, let us not overlook the monumental **importance of his return**. For, when our Lord comes back, it will be for a vastly different purpose than his first coming and under vastly different circumstances. For:

- His first coming was to save, but his second is to judge;
- During his first, he was raised from the dead, but during his second he will raise the dead;
- By his first, he inaugurated the kingdom of God, but by his second he consummates God’s kingdom;
- His first was in obscurity, but second will be universally known;
- In his first he came in humility, but in his second he comes in glory and power;
- In his first, he came as a suffering servant, but in his second, as a conquering king.

Speaking of a returning king, think of **Aragorn** in the *Lord of the Rings*. The Dark Lord Sauron’s power seems overwhelming, Minas Tirith is close to falling, and the forces of good are unable to defeat Sauron’s armies. Yet, Aragorn, at the hour of greatest need, at the moment of blackest darkness, leads the final confrontation against Sauron, defeats evil once and for all, and ultimately takes his throne as the rightful king. In the movie version, Elrond laments, “The Shadow is upon us, Aragorn. The end has come.” Aragorn answers, “It will not be our end but his.”

⁴ By some accounts, there is an 8 to 1 ratio of biblical references concerning Jesus’ second coming versus his first coming. Some scholars estimate that there are over 1,500 total passages or references in the Bible that focus on the return of Christ (1 out of every 25 verses).

You could hear Jesus saying the same thing upon his return. Though at the end of the age there will be the ultimate abomination of desolation (who is the Antichrist), great tribulation, with all hope seemingly lost, yet the Son of Man will return with diamond glory to judge and defeat all who oppose him and persecute his people. His coming, the return of the King of kings, is certain and will lead to ultimate victory. HCC, because this *will* happen with great power and glory and certainty, we need to stay awake!

III. Stay Awake because of the Nearness of Jesus' Return (vv 28-31)

We also need to stay awake because of the nearness of Christ's return. From verses 28 to 31, Jesus gives us a history lesson about the near horizon to establish the reliability of what he just talked about in verses 24 to 27 regarding the ultimate horizon. He uses the predicted fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD (within "this generation") as powerful evidence that his second coming in verses 24 to 27 will also surely happen.

In **verse 28**, Jesus says, "*From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.*" Fig trees in Palestine lost leaves in winter and only late in spring, when winter is past and warm weather is at hand, do their branches sprout buds. When that happened, people knew that summer was about to come.

With this in mind, Jesus says in **verse 29**: "*So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.*" Jesus had previously used the fig tree to illustrate the destruction of the temple back in Mark 11. Here the imagery functions similarly. The temple's destruction in 70 AD, which was the Son of Man's judgment on Jerusalem, is a preview of what will happen in the end times, when he comes for final judgment on all. "*He is near.*" So, we are to heed Jesus' command to learn from the fig tree this lesson: **Stay awake because his return is near!**

In **verse 30**, he asserts that "*all these things,*" referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, will occur within "*this generation,*" meaning the lifetimes of the people who are hearing him. Jesus' words about Jerusalem came to pass about 40 years after he spoke. What he ordains will come to pass. That is why he says in **verse 31**: "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*" Since only Jesus' words abide forever, we must cling to them. We are to stay awake because he has spoken about both the certainty and nearness of his return.

But, just because it is near **does not mean it will necessarily happen soon**. Remember, a towering mountain peak in the distance that appears close to you may actually be quite far away. It is true that "*salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed*" (Rom 13:11). But, it's also true that a thousand years is but a day to the Lord (2 Pet 3:8). So, what is near for God could be a long time for us. But we know that Jesus' return is near from a salvific standpoint, so we must stay awake accordingly.

IV. Stay Awake because of the Suddenness of Jesus' Return (vv 32-37)

Finally, from the last section, verses 32 to 37, we must stay awake because of the suddenness of Jesus' return. Its occurrence is certain and near, but timing of it is unknown and will be sudden. It is like a mother knowing her baby is coming, but not the exact day. Yet, her labor pains will suddenly strike, signaling the baby's imminent arrival.

Verse 32 says: "*But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" "Day" and "hour" have strong eschatological overtones in the Bible, again

referring to the Day of the Lord.⁵ It's remarkable that no one knows when the second coming will occur. The angels, who minister in God's presence, do not know. Not even the Son himself knows! Mysteriously, the incarnate Son limits his knowledge, not out of ignorance, but humble confidence in the Father's will.

So, if even Jesus is uncertain about the timing of his second coming (not its occurrence), then we must reject anyone who claims to know this.⁶ We cannot get caught up end-times fever. Instead, we must submit that God does not deem it vital for us to know when the Son will come again.

However, though we do not know this, we do know **it will be sudden**. So, we need to stay awake. In **verse 33**, our Lord says, for the fourth time, "*Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.*"⁷ Jesus then tells a parable to drive home this point. It's clear that the master of the house is Christ himself. And he is on a journey for an unspecified amount of time, but will one day return. While he is away though, he gives his servants certain tasks to do and issues a command to the doorkeeper to stay awake through all watches of the night so he can open the door when the master returns.

The charge to "stay awake" is not just for the doorkeeper though. In verse 37, Jesus says, "*And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.*" Think of a **firefighter or a paramedic**. His whole job is to be ready before the call to respond comes. So, he stays ready. He doesn't take a nap and say, "If the alarm goes off, then I'll get ready." No, he stays awake, always prepared, and always ready to spring to action at any moment. Likewise, Jesus one day will make his call. His question won't be, "Did you guess right when I was to come back?" No, it will be "When I came, were you ready?"

V. Application: How to Stay Awake

HCC, are you ready for the return of our Lord? Are you staying awake because he *will* return? What does it mean to stay awake exactly? This is the last section of your outline. Simply put, staying awake means **being watchful and faithful in the present**. But, let's break that down into four concrete actions steps.

First, stay awake **by being watchful in prayer**. Jesus had asked the same inner circle, Peter, James and John, to stay and pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. But, three times they fell asleep. Jesus admonished them: "*Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*" (Mk 14:38).

There are temptations to fall asleep, be distracted, despair, and forsake our duty as we wait for the Lord's return. There is also the temptation to join scoffers who say "*Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation*" (2 Pet 3:3-4). I empathize that these are real temptations. But, Jesus is grabbing you by the shoulders and saying, "Stay Awake! Remain spiritually alert! I am coming soon!" Fight the temptations to spiritual slumber, complacency, or compromise by being watchful in prayer.

⁵ "Day": Is 2:12, Amos 5:18; Mk 14:25, Lk 21:34; 2 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 1:12, 18; "hour": Jn 5:25-28, Rev 18:10

⁶ Sadly, there have been many historical examples of individuals who use numerology on books like Daniel and Revelation to pinpoint, in vain, the exact hour and day for Christ's return. One of the earliest was Michael Stifel, who used the date October 19, 1533, at 8:00 AM. William Miller predicted October 22, 1844. When Jesus did not appear, the event became known as the "Great Disappointment." Most recently, May 21, 2011 was the date Harold Camping said our Lord would return (with a follow-up date of October 21, 2011).

⁷ Jesus says "Be on guard" or "take care" previously in verses 5, 9, 23, and here in 33.

Second, stay awake **by being faithful in persevering**. Perseverance is the evidence of genuine faith. Our Lord said back in Mark 13:13, “*And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*” The one who clings to Christ, by faith, instead of abandoning him, he is the one who perseveres and will be saved. We can live in the now and persevere because we know what the end will be. For instance, we can persevere through injustices because true justice is only realized if there is a final divine judgment. We can persevere through despair because true hope is rooted in the return of Christ to make all things new.

Illustration: In John Bunyan’s classic allegory, “Pilgrim’s Progress,” Christian knew his destination was the Celestial City. Yet, he encounters suffering and challenges along the way: the Slough of Despond, Hill Difficulty, Vanity Fair, etc. Christian fails, becomes afraid, gets discouraged and tired, and even falls asleep. But, he does not abandon his journey. He keeps walking toward the city, like Abraham, who went out by faith without knowing where he was going, “*looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God*” (Heb 11:8, 10). So, beloved, even though you may take two steps forward and one step back, or go on detours here and there, staying awake means faithful perseverance in your walk with Christ.

A third way to stay awake is **by encouraging and serving one another**. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about the coming of the Lord and concluded: “*Therefore encourage one another with these words.*” (1 Thess 4:18). Paul expects eschatology to be of supreme comfort and assurance to believers. So, let us encourage one another with the truths about the return of Christ and help each other stay awake.

Paul also thought to be with Christ was better by far (Phil 1:23), but he was convinced that remaining to serve the Philippians was “*more necessary*” and decided to “*continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus*” (1:24-26). Church, are you willing to stay committed on the account of your fellow brothers and sisters here for their progress and joy in the faith? So that they might “*have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus*”? May we serve one another for such a purpose and so help each other stay awake.

A fourth and final step of staying awake is **by continuing to do the work Christ has entrusted to you**. Being watchful and faithful involves activity, not passivity. It is not spiritual laxity, but intentionality. We don’t look at the clouds each day to see if Jesus is coming. Instead, we focus on the work Christ has assigned to us. Recall back in verse 34 how the master “*puts his servants in charge, each with his work.*” Each servant has *his own* work to complete. And so do you:

- Youth and students, it is to study for the glory of God;
- Young adults, it is to work as for God, not for man;
- Parents, it is to raise your kids in the instruction of the Lord;
- Older adults, it is to invest in the next generation for Christ;
- For all of us, it is to love one another and proclaim Christ to the nations.

May we abound in the work of the Lord, as he has assigned to us, knowing that “*in the Lord*” our “*labor is not in vain*” (1 Cor 15:58).

And for **those of you who do not yet know Jesus**, what is your work? In John 6:29, Jesus said: “*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*” Will you face Jesus as the Judge who condemns you to hell for your sins, or as your Savior who has cleansed your sins by his blood? Do you realize that a reason for why Jesus has not yet returned is so that you have time to repent and be reconciled to him? As Peter says, “*The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that*

any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pe 3:9). Turn then to Christ, confess your sins, and trust in him as your Lord and Savior. Be reconciled to God first, and then from there stay awake by completing the work God has prepared beforehand for you to do (Eph 2:10; Phil 1:6).

VI. Conclusion

As we close our time this morning looking at Mark 13, I want to leave you with this final question: **Beloved, how much are you preparing for the return of the Lord?** Think about how much work, thought, sweat, blood and tears are poured into things like your graduation, getting into grad school or residency, landing a job or getting a promotion, buying your first home, getting married, and having a baby. You are right to be careful in preparing for such major milestones in life.

But do you sideline your preparation for the return of Christ, as if you need not do anything but merely show up? Should you not instead be laboring earnestly, joyfully, and devotedly to Christ, being watchful and faithful in the present, so that *when* he returns, he can say to you, "*Well done, good and faithful servant*" (Matt 25:21)?

In the second to last verse of the Bible, our Lord says, "*Surely I am coming soon*" (Rev 22:20). What a wondrous truth! HCC, let us be watchful and faithful in the present as we join John in saying, "*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*" Stay awake because Jesus *will* return!