

Mark 13

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[0 : 0 0] Mark 13 is Jesus' last and longest speech in the Gospel of Mark, and it's one of the most perplexing chapters in the whole Bible. Interestingly enough, Jesus did not say these words in order to confuse us, but to console and encourage and strengthen us.

But it takes a little bit of hard work to see how exactly he's doing that sometimes. So I think we need to come to this passage with a posture of humility seeking clarity on one hand, but also acknowledging mystery, what we don't know on the other hand.

And there's a lot of both. Mark 13 will not give you a timeline of the end times, nor will it satisfy many of our questions about what's happening in the present times, but what it will do is it will challenge us and comfort us.

It will awaken us to God and his throne and his mighty deeds. It will remind us that all of human history is in his hands and is his project. And it will remind us that our lives and all the circumstances and situations that we face right now are being placed under the feet of the Lord Jesus, who reigns and rules from his heavenly throne.

So in this strange passage, and I mean strange, sparked by the disciples' question in verse 4 about the destruction of the temple, it turns out to be a timely word for the people of God who are under pressure.

[1 : 2 9] So no matter which way you slice the pie and interpret Mark 13, and there's like a million different ways to interpret it, the assumed recipients in context are somewhat the same.

It's God's people living under pressure. It's disciples of Jesus living under pressure. And the word for pressure occurs two times in the book in this chapter. It's *thlipsis*. It's translated tribulation in verse 19, a tribulation that the people of God have not known since the beginning of creation.

And then in verse 24 again, in those days after the tribulation, and it describes a whole cosmic reordering, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will be falling from heaven, the powers in heavens will be shaken.

And so this word tribulation can essentially means pressure or friction. It's like if you take two blocks of wood and you rub them against each other cross grain, it creates friction.

Or if you boil a kettle and steam is whistling out of the spout, it's pressure. So what is being described here is when the kingdom of God breaks into the world, it creates pressure as new wineskins do not easily fit, or new wine does not easily fit into old wineskins.

[2 : 4 6] And it creates pressure in the world. So whatever is happening in Mark chapter 13, I want to be very clear from the beginning. Jesus is speaking to his people as they are experiencing immense pressure for being his disciples, and he does not want them to be caught off guard or unaware or discouraged in the middle of the pressure they are experiencing.

Verse 13, Jesus even goes so far as to say, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake, but the one who endures to the end will be saved. So have you ever experienced pressure that made it hard for you to endure in your faith?

Pressure at home, at school, at work, pressure online, in the midst of sickness or suffering or family. Have you ever experienced pressure that made it hard for you to endure in the faith?

And these are words for you this morning. Because that is the pastoral heart of Mark 13. Because Jesus knows our hearts, and he knows that under pressure, we are tempted to give in.

We are tempted to give in on the one hand of false teaching, tempted to give in on the other hand of personal anxiety, and tempted to give in on the other hand to convenient distractions. And so Jesus wants to prepare us, and he wants to strengthen us for those moments of pressure that we may not give in.

[4 : 15] And he does this through giving us three pastoral exhortations, three pastoral encouragements. And I want to give a little shout out to Kathy Shane Ross for helping me see this on Thursday in a conversation.

Do not be deceived, says Jesus. Do not be disheartened, or discouraged. And third, do not be distracted. Those are the three things that I think are at the heart of this passage, and I'll show you why in about five or six minutes.

But first, I think we need to grapple with some of the meaning of the passage. But I wanted to say the applications early because the next five or six minutes might get a little dense.

And I don't want you to worry. I'm coming to your neighborhood eventually. Eventually. So what precisely is Jesus talking about in Mark chapter 13?

We've talked about the pastoral intent, but what is he talking about? And this is where things get a little dicey, a little tricky. Is Jesus talking about the destruction of the temple, which had essentially happened in 70 AD?

[5 : 20] Or is he talking about, much further down the line, his second coming in glory to judge the living and the dead and to make all things new? Or is he interestingly talking about some combination of the two?

Now, most scholars think that Jesus is talking about some combination of the two. They suggest that at least from verse 32 onwards, Jesus has set his sights on his second coming, when he will come to make all things new and to judge the living and the dead and to gather his people into his presence for all eternity.

Now, there are other scholars that say it doesn't just happen there. There's a more complex interweaving of two horizons throughout this passage. So in verses 1 through 13, when Jesus talks about these things, he's referring to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

And then in verses 14 to 27, when Jesus talks about those days, he's talking about his second coming. And then he goes back in verses 28 to 31, when he talks about these things, talking about the destruction of the temple.

And then he goes forward again in verses 32 and following, talking about that day in reference to the second coming. So these scholars suggest that it's almost like shuffling two decks of cards together.

[6 : 41] Jesus is weaving together two distinct things into one picture. Or the way I like to think of it is imagine looking at the mountain range in Vancouver on a midsummer day and describing the beauty of the mountain range.

You can speak of it as one thing, but in reality, that mountain range has many layers of depth to it. So without getting too bogged down into the details, I want to draw your attention to what I consider to be some of the richest, the theological richest and spiritually richest verses in this chapter.

Verses 24 to 27. In those days, after that tribulation or after that immense pressure, and then he goes on to use language from Isaiah to describe a whole cosmic reordering.

The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. It's a cosmic reordering. And the verse 26 is language from Daniel describing a heavenly enthronement or a royal coronation.

And then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then verse 27 describes a mission, a worldwide mission, in light of that enthronement.

[8 : 06] And then he will send out the angels, or that can be translated messengers, and gather his elect from the four winds from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

Verse 26, the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. The question is, is Jesus coming up or coming down?

Sounds like a weird question. But in other words, is Jesus going from earth to heaven? Or is he coming from heaven to earth in the clouds here?

In other words, is this verse describing Jesus' ascension and enthronement in heaven? Or is it describing his second coming and glory on earth to judge the living and the dead?

Now it's not clear cut, but the vision in Daniel 7 actually describes not the Son of Man coming down to earth, but the Son of Man coming up to the throne of heaven and being placed on the seat of power and glory and might.

[9 : 11] So there's good reason to believe that in verse 26, this is potentially talking about the enthronement of Jesus in heaven after his ascension. And this is not disconnected from his second coming, because as we'll see in verses 32 to 37, the second coming of Christ is not a completely new thing.

It is the completion of what began at Jesus' enthronement, the placing of everything in the universe under Jesus' feet and rule and reign and authority. Now if this is the case, stick with me here, friends.

Come into your neighborhood soon. If this is the case, then in Mark 13, Jesus is encouraging us to view our lives, no matter how difficult, how depressing, how much pressure we're experiencing, our lives are living within and under the sovereign rule of Christ's sovereign love.

He is on the throne despite all appearances to the contrary. He has been enthroned.

It is final. It will not be reversed. He is at the right hand of God. Now I think this is why Jesus' exhortations in Mark chapter 13 are not him just coming alongside us and patting us on the back in the middle of our difficulty and be like, it's going to be okay, don't worry about it.

[10 : 38] It's something much stronger than that. These are encouragements from the throne of grace. They're royal encouragements for disciples living under pressure.

How is it that the risen and ascended and enthroned Christ prepares us and strengthens us for a life of faithfulness and mission when we experience pressure in our lives? He says to us, do not be deceived.

Do not be discouraged. And do not be distracted. Twice Jesus warns first that we not be deceived by false teachers or false prophets.

Friends, are you with me? Is it somewhat clear? Okay. Look at verse 5 and 6 with me. I find this so fascinating that this is where Jesus would begin.

They say to him, when are these things going to happen? Give us a sign. And he says, do not be deceived. So often the questions that we ask Jesus are because our hearts are seeking things that might lead us astray.

[11 : 49] See that no one leads you astray, says Jesus in verse 5. Many will come in my name saying, I am he. And they will lead many astray. And then skip forward to verse 21.

And then if anyone says to you, look, here is the Christ, the Messiah, or look, there he is, do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, the elect.

So be on your guard. I have told you all these things beforehand. So what we see here is actually something quite tender. Our Lord is aware of the tendency of our hearts when under internal duress or external pressure to look for sources of significance and control and security in the wrong places.

And it's often in these areas of longing for significance and control and security that false teachers will come in and tap into that longing and deceive us.

Claiming to be and offer what only Christ can be and offer. So Jesus is asking us to pay attention and be aware of where we put our confidence in times of stress.

[13 : 09] False prophets will offer impressive buildings, peaceful circumstances, a predictable future. Two illustrations of this. When I was ministering in Southern California, a man approached me at my church building and he said that he would like to buy my church a facility if I would partner with him in ministry.

He was very wealthy. I was like, well, this seems too good to be true. And it was. A few conversations later and he was serious about the money.

I discovered that he was seeking to use his money to do what he thought was a really noble task, to unite all religions in the area of Southern California into one religious organization and therefore to bring unity and peace where there are drastic differences.

He was, in a sense, a false prophet tapping into the human longing for significance and unity and peace where people are experiencing the pressure of division or maybe even just the practical needs of a place to meet.

There was another man and this one who was actually in my congregation who told me that he would give the church two million dollars towards a facility. It's interesting how facilities tend to tap into the core of our hearts in a lot of ways.

[14 : 31] Two million dollars for a facility fund and he also wanted me to license him as a minister. And in a conversation with him over lunch he told me that Jesus told him that Jesus was going to return in his lifetime.

He was dead serious. A dear old man who was dead serious. And so it was one of those times where I had to say to him, brother, I think you're speaking out of the longing of your heart for a predictable and easy future.

You see, false prophets will also come in and offer certainty and assurance where we feel fragile and fearful. And Jesus is saying, do not be deceived by that.

I am on the throne. You don't have to look elsewhere for that certainty and that assurance. So just a few practical discernment questions for us in how do we kind of discern false teaching in our lives.

I think we ask of the teacher what motivates their teaching. And is it motivated by an inordinate desire for power or money or fame? We ask, what is the center of their teaching that they normally begin with and they normally end with?

[15 : 54] Is it Christ or something or someone else? What is the outcome of their teaching for their living? Is it the fruit of the Spirit or is it more power and control and fame?

How do they respond when people question their teaching? Is it humility or anger? And are they submissive to scriptural authority and communal accountability?

In other words, are they teachable at the hands of God and others? So Jesus exhorts us and encourages us, do not be deceived. See that no one leads you astray in verse 5.

And the second thing is do not be discouraged. One thing is very clear in Mark chapter 13. Disciples of Jesus are going to live through some discouraging and devastating and alarming circumstances.

Verse 7, there's going to be wars. Verse 8, natural disasters. Verse 9, persecution. Verse 11, prosecution. Verse 12, family division. Verse 13, public ridicule.

[16:55] Verse 14 through 16, physical displacement. Wow. Physical displacement. I just think of some of our dear brothers and sisters who have joined us recently from Afghanistan who made their journey here by foot from Brazil.

When Jesus said, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me, he meant it. When we are under pressure, we can get discouraged and lose sight of the main focus.

And Jesus knows our hearts are prone to anxiety when we face unpredictability. He knows that we like to know where life is taking us and how to navigate it and how it's going to go.

But here, Jesus reminds us that we will not always have a choice in the matter. Jesus reminds us that his mission is not dependent on our choices and our circumstances and that wherever we find ourselves, he will sustain us with his Holy Spirit.

He will open our lips to proclaim his praise, we're told in verse 11. And when they bring you to trial or deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say.

[18:11] But say whatever is given you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And so Jesus exhorts and encourages us, first, not to be discouraged, second, or first, not to be deceived, second, not to be discouraged, and third, not to be distracted.

And this is where we'll kind of be ending. Notice how Jesus ends in verse 32 through 37 with a parable about the master and his servant and when the master will return.

This is looking at the horizon of his second coming. And this is meant to keep us alert, not fearful. Faithful, not fearful. I once had a college roommate when I was in college who had been told that the Lord could come at any moment and he would take some and leave others behind so the rapture would happen.

And one time he was taking a nap and I was at my desk studying. And during the nap I needed to use the bathroom so I went from my desk to go use the bathroom and when I came back he had woken up from his nap and didn't see and saw that I wasn't there but he was left behind.

And he was freaking out. So that's not how we're supposed to that's not the posture we're supposed to have when it comes to the second coming of the Lord.

[19:37] Like this build some sort of dread eschatological dread in us or something like that. What it's supposed to do is build an alertness a spiritual awakensness and aliveness in our day-to-day life.

And the way Jesus drives this home in verse 32-37 is actually by a parable as he so often does in his teaching. He says, concerning that day or hour no one knows not even the angels in heaven nor the sun I don't quite understand that but only the Father.

Be on guard keep awake for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey here's the parable when he leaves home and puts his servants he leaves home and puts his servants in charge each with his work and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake therefore stay awake for you do not know when the master of the house will come in evening at midnight when the rooster crows or in the morning lest he come suddenly and find you asleep and what I say to you I say to all stay awake.

So Jesus is picturing us as servants that the master has left behind in a sense and entrusted with his mission in the world and he's saying in a sense I don't want you to be distracted by concerns about when I am actually the master is actually going to return I want you to be focused on doing the work that the master has entrusted you to do while he's away and Jesus knows how easily we are distracted from the work he's entrusted to us we tend to get distracted by circumstances what is or isn't happening around us and we tend to get distracted by people what they are or are not doing around us for example during COVID lockdowns I had to take these periodic breaks from fast from reading news feeds on my phone because I found eventually that constantly reading about the daily events of American politics was limiting my pastoral ability to relate to others outside of a political polarized worldview and that was hindering my ability to love them and care for them

I was getting distracted so what is a disciple of Jesus to do under pressure while waiting for the return of the Savior and I think this parable is telling us two things it says servants of Jesus are just meant to get on with the daily work of serving the master and the work of a servant is just daily repetition often of the same things to keep the house in order so it's not glamorous work that a servant is often doing it's often unseen work it's often work that is not acknowledged by others it's often thankless work it's often small work it's often hidden work it's the little daily things of being faithful to the master in one's God-given vocation that we are to do preaching and living the gospel day in and day out that's the vision that's given to us but there's a second aspect to this vision to the active aspect there is a contemplative aspect and part of the work that Jesus has given us to do is to work at prayer the activity of the watchful servant is not just a hyper busyness always doing things waiting for the master to return there can be a way in which the busyness that characterizes our lives can actually be a form of spiritual sleepiness and Jesus wants to get us away from that so notice in chapter 14 as Jesus takes his disciples to the garden of Gethsemane he's preparing for the cross three times he has to wake up the disciples from their slumber saying please stay awake and pray with me and that word stay awake is the exact word that we have here it's mentioned three times

[23 : 40] Jesus says keep awake in verses in chapter 13 and then three times in the garden he wakes up his disciples who are sleeping when they're supposed to be praying so I think there's this connection within the gospel of Mark between staying awake and learning to pray because prayer is the primary means by which we stay awake and alert and alive to what Jesus is doing in the world from his throne he sits at the right hand of God interceding for us we are told and so my brothers and sisters as we pray in the cafe as we do intercessory prayers as we murmur and mutter the quiet prayers of our own hearts what we are doing is asking the Lord to help us stay awake in all of our circumstances under pressure the fact that he and he alone sits on the throne I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen