Watchful, Hopeful, Faithful
Mark 13

We're looking at Mark 13 - a passage where virtually every verse is debated. Is Jesus talking about the destruction of the temple in 70AD, or the end of time, or both? And we can't look at all the various interpretations or we'd be here till next Sunday! Instead, I'm going to tell you what I think Jesus is saying, because - obviously! - I think it's right. But it's also good.

And if you're already a Christian, seeing what Jesus says here can help you live a hopeful, faithful, fruitful life. And if you're not yet a Christian, it tells you why you should become one.

But to start, look how Mark begins: v1, 'As he [Jesus] came out of the temple…' And since Jesus arrived in Jerusalem a few days previously, all the action has centred on the temple. But now, he leaves it for the last time and heads to the Mount of Olives.

But as he does, one of the disciples looks back and says, v1, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!"

And the temple was one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world. Wonderful, but doomed. Because Jesus replies, v2, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." Now, when Jesus cast out the buyers and sellers from the temple he hinted that the sacrificial system the temple depended on, and the priesthood, was living on borrowed time. But this is the first time he specifically states the temple's going to be destroyed.

So when they get to the Mount of Olives, and look out over Jerusalem and the temple, four disciples ask him, v4, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?"

So, that's the question Jesus is answering. And it has two parts: 1. when will the destruction of this temple we're looking at take place? And 2. what will be the sign that that's about to happen? Two questions about the same event.

And we're going to follow the structure of Jesus' response and see three things: 1. Be on your guard; 2. Be hopeful; 3. Be faithful.

Be On Your Guard
And in v5-13 Jesus answers the first part of their question - 'when will these things be?', 'When will this temple be destroyed?' Except, he doesn't answer it the way you might expect, by getting out his calendar and discussing dates. Instead he tells them things they're going to see happening, or personally experience, in the build up to its destruction. But notice how he introduces them: v5, "See that…" It's an imperative. Exactly the same imperative he repeats in v9, "Be on your guard" and v23, "Be on guard."

Verse 5 again, "See that no one leads you astray." So, Jesus' major concern is not that they have a time-line of events, it's making sure they're alert to the fact that events or people or personal experiences could lead them down the wrong track.

And first up are false messiahs, men who come saying, v6, 'I am he!' And they need to be alert to that, Jesus says, because 'they *will* lead many astray.' In fact, Jesus considers this threat so

significant that he returns to it in v22 - the only warning he does return to. And in v22 he adds the negative influence of false teachers as well.

And the New Testament letters, all written before the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, give repeated examples of false teachers infiltrating churches. And the book of Acts and contemporary historians document at least four men who led popular uprisings, claiming to be the messiah.

Then, in v7-8, Jesus warns them that they'll hear of 'wars and rumours of wars.' And again he was right. Between Jesus saying this and the destruction of the temple, there were wars in Armenia, Parthia, Britain, Ptolemia, Tiberia, Mauretania and finally Judea, with 10s of 1000s killed and 100s of 1000s displaced.

But, Jesus tells them in v7, when you hear of those wars, 'do not be alarmed. This must take place, *but the end is not yet*.'

Now, if wars were not going to be a sign that the end of the temple was near, why would Jesus raise them and tell them not to be alarmed?

Because wars are alarming. We hear of them and worry about our own safety. Will it spread? Will we get caught up in it? And as one commentator puts it, when something seems to threaten your life you can be tempted to think the whole world is ending. But wars won't signify the end of the temple, Jesus says, let alone the end of the world. These things must take place, he says, they're the tragic, normal course of a world in rebellion against God.

Then in v8 Jesus says: 'There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.' And between AD48 and 67, Philippi, Judea, the whole region of Asia Minor and finally Rome were all hit by earthquakes. And as for famines, Rome suffered in 41, Judea in 46, before the empire-wide famine of 51AD.

Now when an earthquake devastates a region, you may have heard someone link it to this passage and say it's a sign Jesus is coming soon. But Jesus is talking about the destruction of the temple not his coming, and his point is they're *not* a sign, v8, 'These are but the beginning of birth pains.' It's an image Paul picks up on in Romans 8. They're evidence of creation groaning, longing to be renewed.

Then in v9-13 Jesus tells them they'll experience persecution: from very religious people, from civil authorities, and from their own families. And again he tells them, "Be on your guard." Be prepared, this will happen. And the reason, v9, is "for my sake, to bear witness before them." You see, Jesus was opposed by the religious, by civil authorities, and his own family. So it's no surprise his followers will be too. And once again, the New Testament documents the multiple levels of opposition the early church faced.

And yet, before the temple's destroyed and despite the opposition the disciples are going to face, Jesus says, v10, 'the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.' And you might hear that and think, 'well, even if all the others things Jesus mentions came true before the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, that didn't. So Jesus must be talking about the End Times.' Except, Paul says that's exactly what did happen. Writing between 50-60AD Paul could say that the gospel had been proclaimed 'in the whole world… in all creation under heaven' (Col 1:6,23), that it had been 'made known to all nations' (Rom 16:26). Because the word for nations here is *ta ethne* - which can mean *gentiles*, or

different people groups, or *people living in the country as opposed to the city*. And so Jesus does not mean every single nation in the world without any exception, but that it will be proclaimed to a multitude of nations and people groups. And before the temple was destroyed in 70AD the gospel had spread across the entire known world, from Spain in the West to India in the East, from Scythia in the north to Ethiopia in the South.

And so, even though they're going to face opposition and shouldn't be surprised by that, Jesus tells them, 'do not be anxious'. The Holy Spirit will give them the words they need to bear witness to Jesus just when they need them, even under pressure.

And think for a moment of Mark's first readers. Because he wrote this for the Christians in Rome around 60AD. Jerusalem had still not fallen, but they were experiencing increasing opposition for their faith and, within a year or two, they were being outright persecuted under Nero. And because they stayed loyal to Jesus many of them would pay with their lives. And through Mark, Jesus is saying to them, and to us. Don't be alarmed. Be prepared for opposition, and know God has you in his hands. And, v13, 'The one who endures to the end *will be saved*.' So, stay faithful for as long as it takes - and God will save you. Doesn't mean he'll save your life. You might lose your head, but not a hair of your head will be lost.

But then in v14 comes the sign that is 'it'. Everything else - false teachers, wars, earthquakes, famines, persecutions, are the tragic normal of human history or the Christian life. But this one's different. And it's Jesus' answer to the second part of their question - the sign that the destruction of the temple is about to happen.

It's when they see, v14, 'the abomination of desolation standing where it ought not to be.' And *the abomination of desolation* means something abominable, something sacrilegious, that defiles the temple. And the first person to use that expression was the prophet Daniel, who foretold how Antiochus Epiphanes set up a pagan altar in the temple in 167BC and sacrificed pigs on it. And Jesus is saying, when you see something like that defiling the temple, v14, 'then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.' That'll be the signal to get out of Jerusalem because it's about to be destroyed.

So what was it?

Well, two candidates stand out. And the first is the Roman General, and soon to be emperor, Titus. And having laid siege to Jerusalem, and finally broken through the wall, Titus entered the temple, and the Most Holy Place, taking a prostitute with him. While outside, the Roman legions erected their standards and sacrificed to them.

The only problem is, Jesus says the abomination of desolation will be a sign telling the Christians to flee Jerusalem because her destruction is near. But by the time Titus entered the temple it was too late to flee.

So the most plausible candidate may be the Zealots, the Jewish militants, who in AD67, at the beginning of the war with Rome, occupied the temple, murdered some of the priests and threw out the rest. And the chief priest of the time, Ananus wrote, it would have been far better if 'I had died before seeing the house of God full of countless abominations and its… sacred precincts crowded with those whose hands are red with blood!'

And Eusebius, the church historian, tells us that it was while all this was happening that the Christians in Jerusalem undertook what's called the Flight to Pella, in what's now Jordan, and so escaped the suffering that would came on Jerusalem.

And it's that suffering Jesus describes in v19: 'For in those days' - in the time building up to the destruction of the temple - 'there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be.'

And Jesus is not describing there a great suffering at the end of time. The word translated 'tribulation' is the word *thlipsis*. It's used 45 times in the New Testament, and translated as affliction, suffering, anguish, burdened, persecution, troubles. And virtually every time it refers to the current reality of life as a Christian. That *thlipsis* is what marks the Christian life between the 1st and 2nd comings of Christ. It's why NT scholar, Greg Beale, says the great tribulation 'begins with the sufferings of Christ and is now shared by all believers.' It's why in Revelation 1:9 John describes himself and his fellow Christians as 'partner[s] in *the tribulation* and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.'

Now you might think, 'sure, but Jesus says the suffering will be unlike anything that's happened before or after. So what about the holocaust, or the millions killed under Stalin or Pol Pot? Surely Jesus is pointing to something terrible at the end of history.'

Except, the way Jesus describes it is a standard way the Old Testament writers described the judgements of God. The plagues that fell on Egypt, the judgment that fell on Judah at the time of the Babylonians, the judgements threatened in the time of the prophet Joel, are all said to be unlike anything that's happened before or will be. Because there's a sense in which God's judgments are always unequaled.

But also, the siege and fall of Jerusalem *were* horrendous. And Josephus, the Jewish historian - who was there - describes it in horrendous, graphic detail. To persuade the city to surrender, the Romans crucified any escapees, erecting their crosses around the city walls so everyone could see them. In fact, they crucified so many, up to 500 people a day, that they ran out of wood.

Inside the city there was infighting, murder, famine and disease. In fact, the famine got so bad that Josephus records a mother killing, cooking and eating her own child. And when the walls were finally breached, the Romans massacred the survivors, and Josephus describes the streets flowing with blood. One million were killed, he said, and 97,000 enslaved.

Now, even if his numbers are exaggerated, the tribulation, the suffering, was horrendous. It's why Jesus says in v20, "If the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would survive." But God did cut short the days. The siege lasted 5 months, short for siege warfare. And he did it, Jesus says in v20, 'for the sake of the elect, whom he chose'. Because even in the carnage of Jerusalem's destruction, God knew who was his.

So, if v5-23 are all about the destruction of the temple in 70AD, does it have anything to say to us? And the answer is, yes.

Firstly, it tells you, fix your eyes on Jesus. Ask yourself, why was the temple torn down? Because Christ is the ultimate temple - the place where heaven and earth meet. Why did the sacrificial system come to an end? Because Christ is the one, full and final sacrifice for sins - never to be

repeated. Why are there no more priests? Because Jesus is the ultimate, great high priest, through whom you can approach God.

So if you find yourself interested in the End Times, just check your heart: are you more excited by the various scenarios of how things might play out, or in the glories and grace of Christ?

Secondly, as Jesus says here, be on your guard, be prepared, you will face opposition for being loyal to Jesus. Paul writes to Timothy, 'All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.' (2 Tim 3:12). It's a normal part of the Christian life. So don't be surprised by it, but do keep going.

Thirdly, be on your guard against false prophets. It's the only warning Jesus returns to twice, because the greatest danger is not opposition, it's false teaching. And tragically, there is a long history of people failing to take Jesus' warnings seriously. And instead of reading the text in its historical context they look for fulfillments in their recent past or present and get into all sorts of trouble as a result.

And so, fourthly, be witnesses not speculators. Our job is not to speculate about the end, it's to proclaim Christ. Just prior to his ascension, the disciples asked Jesus, "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Isreal?" And Jesus replied, "It's not for you to know times or seasons" (Acts 1:6-7). Instead, in the power of God's Spirit, they were to be witnesses to the life, death, resurrection, rule and reign of Christ. And so are we.

And as you do…

Be Hopeful

And in v24-27 Jesus says people "Will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with power and great glory" (v26).

And there are good reasons for thinking Jesus may still be talking about the destruction of the temple.

When he says in v24-25, that "After that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light…" he's using exactly the same kind of cosmic language the Old Testament prophets used to describe God's judgments on earth. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel and Amos all use similar or identical words to describe the fall of Babylon, Samaria, Egypt or Jerusalem to Babylon. We might say an event was earth-shattering, they'd say, the heavenly powers were shaken.

Then, when Jesus talks of the Son of Man coming on clouds, he's referring to Daniel's vision in Daniel 7. But there the Son of Man isn't coming down to earth, he's going up to God, to the Ancient of Days, to be vindicated by him. And the destruction of the temple *was* vindication that Jesus was who he said he was.

And if Jesus is still talking about the destruction then in v27, where Jesus says the angels will be sent out to gather the elect, the word *angels* could be translated messengers - same word - and that could be the early church spreading out and preaching the gospel.

And yet, for two reasons, I think it's more likely Jesus has sifted subjects. Firstly, in v23 Jesus summarises what he's been saying about the temple's destruction: "Be on guard; I have told you all

things beforehand." And secondly, in v24 he talks about what's to come *after* the suffering of Jerusalem and during the time when suffering is a part of the normal Christian life: "But in those days, *after* that tribulation, the sun will be darkened…" And because the temple, as the meeting place of heaven and earth, was like the cosmos in miniature, Jesus ties its end to the End of all things and the Beginning of Everything Else.

And so whether it's seismic changes in the world order, or literally the fabric of heaven that crumbles, Jesus says he, the Son of Man, will return and when he does, as one commentator puts it, there will be 'a radical upheaval' of creation.

And our old order of days and nights and sun and moon will end, and Christ will make all things new. And the tribulations of this life will be history and he'll wipe every tear from every eye. Because while Daniel 7 shows the Son of Man coming to God to be vindicated, in Acts 1, when Jesus ascended on the clouds, going back to the Father, the angels said, 'you'll see him come again just like this.'

And Jesus says, v27, "He will send out the angels and gather his elect." Because if an army prides itself on never leaving its wounded on the battlefield, Jesus promises that in all the opposition you face for him, he'll never forget you.

So whatever you're experiencing now, whether you die before Christ's return, or are alive at his return, the outcome's the same. The day is coming when you will be with Christ, and Paul says that 'is far better' (Phil 1:23).

And that means, if you're a Christian, as you see the world being shaken, you can be full of hope.

But what if you're not yet a Christian and you struggle with the idea of Christ's return and, in particular, his returning to judge and put every wrong right. What does this say to you?

Well, look at the injustice of the world. Don't you long for that to be put right? Or maybe harm has been done to you; deep down, don't you want justice to be done? But atheism and secularism can never give you that. Because they can't give you a Judge or a final judgment. And where does that leave you? Either in despair, because people get away with it. Or, you've got to take matters into your own hands, and get your own back in this life - and you become the judge. But that just continues the cycle of harm and violence. Only Christianity can give you the hope and certainty that every wrong will be righted and justice will be done. Because one day, the Judge will return.

So be on your guard and be hopeful. But finally…

Be Faithful

And in v28-37 Jesus revisits first, the destruction of the temple, and second, his return; and he gives an illustration for both.

First, the temple. Verse 28, "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves you know summer is here." In other words, when the tree starts sprouting, it's a sign! Summer's coming! Just so, v29. "When you see *these things* " same word the disciples used in their question about the temple "… you know that it is near, at the very gates." So, again, when they see the sign of the abomination of desolation, they know the fall of Jerusalem is coming - so flee. And they did.

And then, he says, v30, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until *all these things* take place”. In other words, the destruction of the temple will occur within a generation. And by the summer of AD70, one generation after Jesus said this, the temple was no more.

But if the temple won’t last, neither will heaven and earth, v31, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Because the words of Jesus are more enduring than creation itself.

And there will be a day, Jesus says, when heaven and earth *do* pass away, v32, “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows.” Now, up until now, Jesus has been speaking in the plural: of ‘these things’, and ‘all these things’ and ‘those days’. But now he’s talking about a single Day and hour - the day when he returns, when heaven and earth are renewed.

And while there’ll be a sign before the temple’s destruction, there’ll be no such sign before his coming. No one knows when that day will be, only God the Father. Which means, since the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, it could happen at any time - so, v33, “Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.”

And to drive that message home in v34-36 Jesus uses a parable, of a man leaving home and going on a journey, leaving his servants in charge of their work. And they have no idea when he’s coming back. But when he does come back, he wants to find them at their posts, ready and working.

And these first disciples, and you and me, we’re the servants, and Jesus is the master. And as we wait for his coming we should be faithful in everything he’s given us to do, and do it in the knowledge that he could return any moment.

But why not give us a sign that his coming’s soon? Well, Athanasius, one of the great fathers of the church, said, ‘If we knew the future, we would easily be tempted to postpone human seriousness and delay all decision making.’ In other words, we’d say, ‘hey, the sign hasn’t been fulfilled yet, I’ve got plenty of time’, and we’d live like that. But when you know that since AD70 Christ could return at any time, it does something for the way you live.

In 1 Thessalonians 5, having said the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, Paul says, yes, so we don’t live like people of the night, but, v8, ‘Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation… so that… we might live for him.’ And James says it’ll even change the way you talk about others, ‘the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers… the Judge is standing at the door’ (James 5:8-9). Because when you know Jesus could walk in at any moment, there are some things you might not say.

So, being prepared for Christ’s coming is not trying to predict dates or interpret signs. It’s about letting your light shine. It’s about being his witnesses to our friends and neighbours. It’s about living out the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love, and doing that together.

So, be on your guard, Jesus says, be hopeful and, as you wait, be faithful!