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Mark / Mark 13:24-37

Reading of The Word: Mark 13:1-37

Introduction

So to recap, last time out I argued for a reading of this text that places the tribulation in the past. The tribulation spoken about in Mark 13 is wrapped up in the events surrounding the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in AD70. This is the plain reading of the text because in **verse 30**, Jesus says about everything up that point, *"Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."*

The lesson of this chapter is not to be on the lookout for signs for the sake of knowing when the end is coming. The lesson is to obey Christ and His commands because signs can be deceiving. The end has not yet come (**verse 7**). And we won't know it has come until it comes. So live life now in watchful obedience.

All this is important because if the tribulation is yet to come, if the world is just going to deteriorate around us — if the piece of ice we're floating on is just getting smaller and smaller all the time, and people on the edges are falling off, and our number is getting less and less, and everyone else is just going to drown — then what's the point of building for the future? If that's the case there's a whole bunch of commands we'll never obey. Be fruitful and multiply being one of them. Leave an inheritance for your children's children, that's another. If the tribulation is to come, if we expect things to just get worse and worse, then we won't have kids, we won't build anything to pass down to our kids, and we'll undermine the future we do have by taking shortcuts in the present. If the world is going down, then everything we do that isn't personal evangelism is just polishing brass on the Titanic.

On the other hand, if the tribulation is behind us, if the worst event in human history (**verse 19**) is behind us, then we can build for the future. We can be patient. We can be obedient with what's in front of us and simply trust God with the results. We can be hopeful and optimistic, not

just about when Christ calls you home to eternity, but about this afternoon. And next week. And ten years from now. And in a century or two. God's given us a mission — to disciple the nations — and Mark 13 tells us that that mission is possible to accomplish. So let's continue through the chapter.

Explanation of The Text

The Coming of the Son of Man (To His Throne)

As we come to verses 24-37, we see the time-frame change. Jesus says *"in those days, after that tribulation."* So now we're talking about events *following* the destruction of the temple in AD70. The language that follows *could* make us think of the end times. There is language about darkened sun and moon (**verse 24**), stars falling from heaven, heavenly powers shaken (**verse 25**). Then the coming of the Son of Man in power and glory (**verse 26**), and angels gathering the elect from everywhere (**verse 27**). But the issue we still have is that **verse 30** is still to come. All of these things are to happen within a generation.

How are we to understand this? I think we are to understand this as the judgement of God, through Christ, that happens at the end of the tribulation in 70AD. It's the *result* of the tribulation. It's the result of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Even though Titus has come in a desolated the temple, it is Christ who is passing judgement on His people.

For example, regarding the sun, moon, and stars, listen to Isaiah 13:10 *"10 For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light."* This is talking about the fall of Babylon. In other words, sun, moon, and stars here likely represent political powers, earthly and spiritual. Colossians 2:15 says that *"15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him."* Christ, through His resurrection, has shown His judgement on Jerusalem fully and finally in AD70 with the destruction of the Temple.

But what about the language in **verse 26** where Jesus is said to be the *"Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory"*? Well, we read that sort of language back in Daniel 7:13-14 *"13 'I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him."*

14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

Note that the direction of travel of the Son of Man is *to the Ancient of Days*. To God the Father. He's not coming *to earth* here, but *to the Father*. And for what purpose? To be given dominion over the powers. The sun, moon, and stars that are being brought under His rule and authority. In His resurrection and ascension, Christ *came* to the throne from which He rules the nations. Remember Mark 12:36 and Psalm 110:1, *"1 The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'"* Sun, moon, and stars bow before Him. Powers in the heavens indeed were shaken.

All this means that we aren't waiting for a second coming *before* Christ rules and reigns. He rules and reigns now, and bit by bit, the world is being brought under His Lordship, until a final judgement comes when He returns. That's why we can pray "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Because He rules here just as much as He rules there.

And then in **verse 27**, following this, Jesus says that *"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."* This is a way of saying *everywhere*. He will gather His people from *everywhere*. This is the ongoing mission of the church. In Revelation 2, we see that churches have angels, and although the gospel has already been proclaimed to all nations (Colossians 1:6), there are elect individuals from all nations and future ages who will be gathered up.

Another Fig Tree Lesson

After this proclamation about the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus returns to a favourite illustration of His — a fig tree. He says in **verse 28** that you can see when Summer is near because fig trees start putting out leaves. In **verse 29**, Jesus again refers to *"these things."* Including everything up till that point since **verse 4**. To summarise, let me quote commentator William Lane,

The catastrophe of sacrilege which will profane the Temple (verse 14) will enable the disciples to know that the destruction of the Temple is imminent in the same manner that the coming of summer is imminent

| *to the moment when the fig tree covers itself with leaves.*

That's pretty straightforward. And then in **verse 30**, the keystone verse that helps us understand when all this is happening. The generation to whom Jesus is speaking will not pass away until all these things take place. A generation, biblically speaking, is about 40 years. If Jesus is speaking somewhere around AD 30-33, then you have about 40 years till the destruction of the Temple. **Verse 30** is the answer to the initial question of when will these things take place from **verse 4**.

Now To The Future

Then in **verse 31**, Jesus says that *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."* Notice the switch from the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple to the passing away of all things — heaven and earth. All things, that is, except His words! This is one of the clearest claims to divinity you will see in the gospels. Isaiah 40:8 says that *"8 The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."* And Jesus here is saying that His words are *those* words. His words are the Word of God which will stand forever.

Remember that Jesus has been speaking about signs and events in history. His teaching has been to not be distracted by them, but to obey no matter what. He is saying, that The Word of God is more trustworthy than what you can see in front of you. The Word is firm. It is this that allows Paul to declare in Galatians 1:8, *"8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed."*

Furthermore, as commentator James Edwards says, *"if Jesus' words will outlive the cosmos, then the world to come is already present in them."* The Word of Christ, the Word of God, is that sure and certain heavenly kingdom foundation on which we can build our lives. If we stray from the Word, we build on sand that will not survive the judgement. But if we build on the Word, we build on the Rock, and that means we are building heavenly lives *now*. Building on the Word is to build with materials pulled out of the eternal and unshakeable. The world to come is present in Christ's Word.

Note as well that Jesus has changed the time frame when He says heaven and earth will pass away. He's talking about some other event than the 'things' of verse 4 that will occur before AD70. He's talking about an event that He says in **verse 32**, *"no one knows, not even the*

angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Concerning *that day or hour*, refers to the day or hour when heaven and earth will pass away. And concerning those events, Jesus, in His human nature, doesn't even know the hour. A reminder that even Jesus had to live by faith! And He did so perfectly. This *is* talking about the future — even for us. It's talking about the Second Coming of Christ. It's talking about the final judgement.

Back To The Present

To close out His teaching, in **verses 33-37**, Jesus gives the imperatives, the commands. Five times in those verses Jesus mentions being on guard, or staying awake Twice in **verse 33**, and once each in **verse 34, 35, and 37**. When Jesus repeats something, He is doing it on purpose. This is what He wants the disciples to remember. This is His lesson: **stay awake**. In **verses 5, 9, and 23** He has told them to be on guard. He is doing the same thing now *five times* at the very end of His teaching. It isn't coincidental that in chapter 14, staying awake will be mentioned five more times between **verses 34-41**, and the disciples will end up asleep, while Jesus sweats blood in the Garden.

In **verses 34-36**, Jesus tells a mini parable. It's very similar to the parable of the tenants in Mark 12. A man goes on a journey, leaves his servants in charge, each with his work, and the command is for them to stay awake (**verse 34**). They are to stay awake because they don't know when the master will return. And in **verse 37**, if there was yet any doubt, Jesus says that this is something that *all* must obey. Including us. We are to stay awake.

Conclusion and Application

What does this mean for us? How are we to stay awake?

I could mention the things I talked about last week. Let me recap what they were:

- We are to have faith in Christ and His Word. His Word outlasts everything. It is the only Rock on which we must build. Everything else, all other ground, is shifting, sinking sand.
- We are to be diligent about threats from within and without the church. But the biggest threats are from within. The threats of false doctrine — that is, anything that veers from the Word of Christ.

- We are to be hopeful. Life is short, so we are to live each day as if it were our last. The Master could return at any moment, so be found working. But life is also long, so we are to be content with obedience in the details, knowing and trusting that God sees all of it, uses all of it, and builds His Kingdom here through all of it.
- We are to be witnesses. Witnesses to the Lordship of Christ, who rules and reigns *now*, and to whom every knee will one day bow. We are to witness to the grace and love of God shown to sinners through the death of Christ on the cross.

That's what I mentioned last week, and that all still applies. It's all in this text too. But let me for a few minutes dig deeper into what *wakefulness* might look like. How are we to stay awake?

Looking at Christ's mini-parable. What has Christ put His servants in charge of (**verse 34**)? What are they to stay awake *for*? What are they watching over? To answer the question, think about what Christ has entrusted to the Church. 1 Timothy 3:15 says *"15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, **a pillar and buttress of the truth.**"* The Church has been entrusted with the Word of God. 2 Timothy 4:3 says, *"3 For the time is coming when people will not **endure sound teaching**, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions..."* Our passions shift around, but the Word of the Lord stands forever. Christ's words will not pass away. We are to stay awake and watch out for errant doctrine that will lead people away from the truth about Christ.

Something else that has been entrusted to some, is to watch over the souls of the sheep. Proverbs 27:23 *"23 **Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds.**"* Hebrews 13:17 tells us that elders are those who are *"keeping watch"* over the souls of the flock of God. It is the job of your elders to stay awake in *that* work.

Jesus also says in the parable that each of us has his *own* work (**verse 34**). What is the work to which we are entrusted? Pick a command. The macro level work is the Great Commission — to preach the gospel to the nations. But how are we to do that? By obeying Christ in the day to day commands of life. The gospel is the declaration that this world belongs to its King — Jesus. So, every act of obeying Christ's words here, as subjects of His, is in one way, preaching the gospel. So, husbands preach the gospel by loving their wives as Christ loved the church. Wives preach

the gospel by submitting to their husbands as unto the Lord. Parents — especially fathers — preach the gospel to their children by not provoking them to anger, but by raising them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. We preach the gospel to each other when we forgive each other as God in Christ has forgiven us, when we overlook an offense, when we associate with the lowly, when younger people respect older people, when older people don't look down on younger people, when men treat other women in the congregation like sisters, when women dress modestly, when men take responsibility, when we pray for each other, when we forsake not the gathering of the church, when we submit to rightful authority... I could add more, but this is the work that God has placed in front of each one of us. And yes absolutely we preach the gospel by... telling others about Jesus. For how will they hear unless someone preaches to them? Preach the gospel and use words — they are necessary.

That is the work that has been given to us by Christ. We don't know when He will come back. He could be back soon, so get to work. He could be back in 850 generations, so get to work. But either way, the point is *stay awake*. Be vigilant.

And we have to do it both at once. That's the key. And that's what I want to end with. Battles are fought on the ground and in the air. Battles are fought in the trenches and in the skies. If they guys in the trenches aren't supported by the guys who can see the big picture, then they end up in trouble. Similarly, if the only thing happening is a bombing run, then there's no one on the ground to move in and actually take the territory.

The mission of God works the same way. If all we do is personal evangelism, the work in the trenches, we will see people won for Christ, but what happens then? If there's no macro war being fought, if there's no *cultural* evangelism happening, then what happens with those individuals? They end up going to university and apostatising. We need, therefore, to live like today is the day of salvation, and reach individuals for Christ. But we also need to live like Christ is going to see a *lot* more people saved over the long haul, and to do that we need to fight an air war of institutional evangelism. Take schools for example. You can give your kids the gospel, you can love them and disciple them, but all of that trench-work is undermined when they are then taught by people who deny God. Take churches for example. Perhaps a seeker-friendly set up might get more people through the doors. But if the church isn't pure, what are people being saved *to*? We need schools, churches,

governments, households, that are seeking to be evangelistically fervent without undermining the long game. And we need to build these sorts of institutions *on the words of Christ* which means building with stuff that will last and outlast the shifting sands of our culture. Those sorts of institutions will be an incredible gift to future generations. They will have a stronghold from which to fight. **Our generation is storming the beaches at Normandy. The next generation will have a beachhead from which they can take Europe.**

I remember arguing this point with another pastor. He said he didn't want to speak out against homosexuality from the pulpit because the main thing is to see people saved. I said to him that if we don't speak out against homosexuality, soon there will be no church in England at all for people to be saved *into*. All he was thinking about was the ground war. Let's just rescue some before the world ends. I wanted him to think about the long term results of compromise. If churches stop preaching against sin, then two things will happen: those churches will cease to be churches. They'll become spiritual social clubs that call themselves churches in which there is no Word or sacrament or discipline. And the churches that will continue to preach against sin will become illegal. Conversion therapy anyone?

Ultimately, whatever we do, Christ's Church wins. But that does not make us fatalists. We are servants with a job to do. But we want to be faithful in our generation. We want the Church here and now and in this place to be faithful. Christ is the Master of the House. He's the Master of the Church. He's the Master of your Home. He's the Master of the cosmos, which is His throne.

For some in this room, you are awake when it comes to the short term. You are focussed on personal evangelism, seeing people saved, meeting needs now. But perhaps you're snoozing when it comes to the future. For others you are awake when it comes to the long term. You want to see the whole culture changed. Christian schools. Christian politics. Christian society. Perhaps you are asleep when it comes to having a desperate burden to evangelise your neighbours. We all need to be awake to both realities. Some may work more in one of those tasks than the others, but neither can neglect the other.

When was the last time you shared the gospel with someone? When was the last time you cared about what was happening in our political sphere? Maybe today, at the very least, some of us need to recalibrate.

One commentator concludes his study of this text with a story about an eclipse that happened in colonial New England. The State legislators panicked because they were worried about what an eclipse signified — they must have been dispensationalists. But one of them said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought.”

In other words, whatever is ahead of us, we have the cross of Christ behind us. So let's stay awake. Let's love our neighbour by reaching our neighbour with the gospel, invite them to church, share a tract with them, have them for dinner. And let's love our neighbour by building for the long haul, contributing to the society in which we live, expecting that Christ's Kingdom is coming here and now.

Let's pray.