

What To Do Till The End

Mark 13:1-37

Introduction - What Question To Ask

As fires have damaged much of Queensland and New South Wales, there has been a noticeable ratcheting up of arguments about climate change and global warming. And this sermon, despite touching on the wrapping up of human history, has nothing to do with that topic. However, what it does have to do with is asking the right questions.

When arguments have been made for and against the fires being connected to climate change and global warming there have been some politicians and commentators who recognise the importance of having that discussion but have asked whether now is the right time to have it. Most of the people being effected by the fires are locals who are unlikely to make a significant impact on the global environment and so it has been asked whether the primary focus of the discussion at this time should have been on finding out what support is immediately required for effected people and for fire fighters.

This morning we're looking at what is commonly described as the most difficult section of Mark's Gospel (which is why I suggested that you look along in a Bible today) and the crux of the discussion happens because of a wrong question.

What is the wrong question? At the start of chapter 13 a disciple makes a comment about how magnificent the temple is. Many reports from the time described the Jerusalem Temple, constructed by Herod, to be one of the great marvels of the ancient world. In response to the disciple's observation Jesus made a prophetic statement, "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." It is in seeking greater information that four of the disciples ask the wrong question:

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

In fairness to the disciples, their question is very natural (after all, I'm sure many of us have checked the internet to see when rain is due to fall again) but Jesus' answer places greater emphasis on the question which he obviously considers should have been asked. Instead of focusing on when these things will happen Jesus focuses on, "What are we to do until then?" or "What are we to do when that happens?"

Overview - Three Areas of Focus

To help us see the focus of Jesus' answer it will help to have an overview of the whole chapter. Now this is just an overview and the more deeply you look into this chapter more you find. You could easily have three or more sermons come from chapter 13 but by taking this overview approach in a single sermon I'm hoping that we can see the heart of Jesus' reply to his disciples' question.

If you've got your Bible open to Mark 13, notice that the first four verses are about the temple and particularly the destruction of the temple. Next, in verses 5 to 8 there is a discussion about the return of the messiah. Finally, in verses 9 to 13 there is the directive about what the disciples were to do. But why do I say finally, we're not even half way through the chapter? Well, look at verses 14 to 19 or 20, what's the focused on? We again have the destruction, or in this case the desolation, of the temple. What about verses 20 or 21 to 27? In these verses there is a discussion about the return of the Messiah. Finally in verses 28 to 37 there is a directive as to what the disciples are to do.

We see here that three points are made but they are repeated. If you like alliteration, the three points are: Destruction, Discussion and Direction. There is a focus on the destruction or desecration of the temple, a discussion about the return of the Messiah and a directive as to what the disciples were to do.

However, while there's clearly these three areas of focus, the dominant focus is that of direction. What the disciples were directed to do. We'll look more at the directions in a moment but to help you see that this is the dominant focus, notice at

the very end of the chapter that the disciples are given the directive to 'watch'. Now look at verse five which is part of the discussion about the messiah, Jesus starts with, "Watch out". Likewise this is implied in the section of the desecration of the temple in verse 14, "When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand." We again see this in the second discussion on the return of the Messiah when in verse 23 Jesus says, "So be on your guard." The repeated directives given to the disciples mixed in with the other areas of focus helps us recognise that this is the most important of the three areas.

So then, I know that this is just a quick overview but let's reiterate, there are three areas of focus, the destruction of the temple, discussion about the return of the Messiah and directives to the disciples and it is the directives which are most important.

The Immediate and The End

However, this chapter doesn't simply repeat the three areas of focus, there is another complicating factor which makes reading and understanding this chapter much more difficult. The complexity is this, is Jesus teaching about the immediate or near future or is Jesus talking about what is going to happen at the end of human history?

Have a look again at verse 14, "When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains." Here we're told that something calamitous is going to happen and that the people will have time to flee. Now compare that to verse 27 about the coming of the Son of Man (Jesus' return), "And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens." On this occasion there doesn't appear to be any time to react or flee because the Son of Man is there to wrap up history.

Similarly, we read in verse 30, “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” Which has the natural reading that Jesus was talking about the people alive at the time. In contrast though, verse 32 says, “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

So then, is Jesus talking about the immediate or near future or is Jesus talking about what is going to happen at the end of human history? The answer of course is, ‘Yes!’ or ‘both/and’. Now, I know that I’ve already given us an overview of the chapter once but to help us see the way Jesus moves from talking about the near future to the end time, let me walk us through this chapter again.

Overview - Near and Far Future

As mentioned earlier, we start with a focus on the Jerusalem temple and Jesus declares that it will be destroyed. This section, all the way to verse 13 is very much focused on daily life even if it is in the context of a period of war and upheaval. In fact, Jesus makes it clear in verse 7 that he is not describing the end times, “When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.”

Likewise, when Jesus describes the desecration of the temple in verses 14 and following it appears that the focus is on fleeing so that people can continue to live. Verse 19 sounds more dramatic, “because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again.” but it’s clear that the end is not pictured here because bad things will happen again. Also, this expression is common Hebraic hyperbole and would have been recognised as that by Jesus’ listeners.

Things change though in verse 24 to 27 and to give it some context I’ll read from verses 22 to 29:

For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.

But in those days, following that distress, ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.

Yes, this is a dramatic change, but the thing is the change is signalled it’s just that we find it hard to notice the signals. This is going to get a little technical but I ask you to stay with me.

First, verse 24 starts with, “But in those days ...” The ‘but’ used is a strong adversative and it’s designed to clearly contrast what’s about to be said with what’s been said earlier. Second, ‘in those days’ sounds like it’s connecting this section to the preceding verses but this is actually an expression used in the Old Testament Prophets to refer to the last days, those days when Yahweh would act. This contrast between this verse and what’s gone before means we could read this verse as saying, “Don’t be misled by those false messiahs when Jerusalem falls. The coming of the Son of Man is really going to be like this ...”

Moving on, we can see the dramatic imagery presented in verses 24 to 27 but what is the prompt to change from seeing the focus on the end times back to the near future in verse 28 to 31? The reason for this is because of the repeated phrase, ‘these things’. In verse 4 the disciples asked, “Tell us, when will these things happen?” In verse 23 Jesus said, “I have told you everything ahead of time.” and then the expression turns up again in verse 29, “when you see these things happening.”

In verse 30 Jesus reaffirmed that the destruction of Jerusalem is near by saying “this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened,” Jesus then concludes this discourse by returning to the unknowability of when the final end will come because that’s something which only the Father knows.

I know that I've gone through this incredibly quickly but the important thing to note is that the majority of chapter 13 concerns the near future but verses 24-27 and verses 32-37 are focused on the end times.

Focus on the Foci

It was at this point in preparing today's message that I was reminded why I normally avoid highly technical sermons. I got a lot out of preparing this and appreciated reading and re-reading this chapter more than a dozen times to get a better grasp of it's meaning as well as reading helpful insights from others, but I've spent close on 2000 words explaining how the chapter holds together but haven't yet dived into the focus of Jesus' teaching here.

Anyway, better late than never, let's look at those three areas of focus, the destruction of the temple, the discussions about the return of the Messiah, and the directives to the disciples. Fortunately, with all that we've talked about, some of these areas can be covered more quickly.

Destruction and Desecration of the Temple

First we consider the destruction of the temple. The most important thing to know about the destruction and desecration of the temple in Jerusalem is that it really did happen about forty years after Jesus made this declaration. The temple was besieged from 68AD before being utterly destroyed in 70AD.

Not only was the temple destroyed and desecrated within the lifetime of at least a number of the people who heard Jesus but Jesus' prophecy here is credited as being a reason why many Christians in Jerusalem survived. It appears that the Jerusalem Christians remembered Jesus' warning to flee and so went to Pella in the foothills of a mountain range in the Transjordan area.

At a more spiritual level, Jesus declaration that the temple was to be destroyed would also have helped his followers to not be dismayed when the destruction

happened and indeed it was actually teaching them not to put their hope in the physical objects of religion.

Discussion On The Return Of The Messiah

The second area of focus is the discussions about the return of the Messiah. Jesus discusses the return of the Messiah twice negatively and once positively. The first time is in verses 5-8 and is a negative comment. In these verses Jesus is assuring his disciples that just because something bad, even calamitous, is happening, it doesn't mean that Jesus is immediately returning.

After the September 11th attacks in 2001 there was some bad weather in Sydney and with people's heightened emotional state I remember one person saying near to me, "It's the end of the world." And they weren't joking. When people have a great calamity happening to them personally or to their community or nation then people are more susceptible to being led astray by others and Jesus cautions against this.

Jesus also discusses the return of the Messiah negatively in verses 20-24. The specific warning on this occasion appears to be to instruct his disciples not to be distracted by false messiahs and false prophets from doing what he has instructed them to do, which is to flee Jerusalem when it comes under siege.

Jesus' discussion about false reports of the Messiah's return can be applied more broadly too, particularly in light of Jesus' warning about how the false messiahs and false prophets can deceive people by doing signs and wonders. As followers of Jesus, we must not let our guard down. Are we alert to how people can subtly encourage us to put our trust in some one or some thing other than Jesus?

Who or what is there today that has the ability to deceive people? Sixty years ago some people would have put their trust in communism but that turned out to be shallow, fifteen years ago probably capitalism would have also been viewed as a great hope for humanity but then we had the Global Economic Crisis, what is there today? Could it celebrities? the deification of the environment for some? Perhaps the

rise of extreme right and left wing political parties is part of this? Whatever the thing or person may be, Jesus doesn't tell us to be paranoid about it but to be on guard.

The third and final time Jesus discusses the return of the Messiah is positively in verses 24 to 27. Here Jesus describes what will happen when the Son of Man truly does come. The critical things to note here is that there's no mistaking this arrival. The coming of the Son of Man will be marked by cosmic cataclysmic changes and everyone will see his coming and it will be accompanied by angels. On the coming of the Son of Man there's no need to stand guard any more because the Son of Man will gather in all the people who belong to him.

In the face of uncertain times this final discussion on the return of the Messiah would have given great hope to Jesus' disciples and the readers of Mark's Gospel because it assured them, like it assures us, that Jesus has history in hand and we are secure even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Directives To The Disciples

The final area of focus and, as I said earlier, the most important is the directives which Jesus gives to his disciples. Here Jesus answers the question which the disciples didn't ask, How are we to live in the light of a coming period of turmoil?

First, we are instructed to be on guard. We are to be watchful and alert, not in some paranoid way, but being careful not to give in to fear when there are times of conflict and turmoil and nor are we to put our trust in some one or something other than Jesus.

Not only are we to be on guard but we are to stand firm. If you look at verses 9 to 13 we see that standing firm refers to enduring persecution. We are to stand firm in the face of social or judicial persecution and we are also to stand firm in the face of persecution at the most intensely personal level in the family.

Jesus envisions us being able to endure persecution as an opportunity to witness as well:

You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

There is encouragement provided in these verses but also some clear, if unpleasant, realism in this section. We can be assured that we won't be abandoned but rather the Holy Spirit will help and guide us even when we find ourselves on trial. That's a great encouragement but in the very next verse Jesus says, "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death." So you won't be abandoned, you will be given words to say but you may also be killed! That's realism for us! We however have a hope which goes beyond death. This is why Jesus can say, "Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved." Yes, death may be on the cards for us because people will oppose us because we follow Jesus and declare his lordship to others but we will still be saved.

Now here's an interesting point about standing firm. Standing firm in the sense that we don't give up our trust in Jesus when persecution comes doesn't mean that we never flee persecution or calamity. Just after telling his disciples to stand firm he instructs them to flee Jerusalem when the temple is desecrated. We can obviously flee for our lives without denying that Jesus is our Lord.

Jesus' directives to stand firm and witness to others about him appear to be the intent of Jesus' final directive for his followers to 'Watch!' In verses 32 to 37 where Jesus directs his disciples to keep watch, he says "Be on guard! Be alert!" The disciples are to do what they have been directed to do and thus show that they have been faithful servants while awaiting the master's return.

Conclusion

Thank you for your patience today as we've looked at a more technical and complex passage than usual. I do hope though that you've grown in your understanding of Jesus teaching about the fall of Jerusalem as well as his teaching on when the Son of Man will come to wrap up history. Moreover, I pray that you also see the more personal impact of Jesus instructions here. Pain, turmoil, and persecution will come but don't lose heart or be deceived into thinking that Jesus has returned without you knowing it. Stand firm by continuing to trust in Jesus and do what we are directed to do - witness to others about Jesus and look forward to his true return.

[we're going to sing now a song that reminds us that whatever may come in the future Christ is our one true Cornerstone]