

# Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

## Session Twenty-Two – Mark 13

***Mark 13:1 As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”***

***2 “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”***

When I first decided to do a close study of the Gospel of Mark with you, I was looking forward to everything – other than Chapter 13, which is the most difficult chapter of Mark to try to understand. One of the primary reasons is that it seems to be intended for two audiences, each of whom are getting a specific message. Which audience is which, which one is us, and what is there in this chapter for 2022-era Canadian Christians?

Chapters 11-13 have been largely about the Temple, and how the age of the Temple Sacrifices – and the whole priestly caste running the show – was coming to an end, to be replaced by Jesus, the Perfect Sacrifice, and the Great High Priest for all people.

Jesus has been getting increasingly specific about the imminent overthrow of the Temple, illustrating it with the overturning of the tables and the cursing of the fig tree, and engaging in debates with the Temple officials – the meaning of which was abundantly clear to them. But now, Jesus will come right out and say it – the Temple is doomed.

Small wonder the disciples remarked at the size of the stones from which the Temple and Temple Mount were constructed – there are many the size of transport trailers! The buildings, particularly the Temple itself, was described by many visitors of the day as surpassing even the grandest building in Rome.

Jesus’ prophecy regarding “not one stone left upon another” was proven tragically true, when the Romans sacked, burned, and destroyed the Temple, so completely that there are scant archaeological remains today. The Temple Mount, the vast rectangular platform upon which the Temple stood, comprising almost 20 percent of the entire city, is all that remains.

***Mark 13:3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, 4 “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”***

The disciples ask – when will the Temple be destroyed? When will the Jewish faith as they know it be forever changed? For the two go hand in hand – that much they figured out.

Note, however, that when Jesus predicted his own death, they didn't ask him a thing. But when they hear the Temple is in danger, they must know more.

***Mark 13:5 Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you. 6 Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 8 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.***

One of the limitations of being human is that we view time in a linear fashion – one thing follows another in chronological order. But this chapter in Mark doesn't follow human chronology. Jesus is looking ahead to what will come, and giving important warnings, some of which are right around the corner, some many years away. But the immediate focus is the audience of Jesus and Mark's day.

There were in fact numerous “false Messiahs.” Some, notably leaders within the insurrectionist Zealots, claimed to be the ones to deliver Israel, evicting the Romans, and restoring former glory. They sparked the AD 66 rebellion, leading to the Roman invasion, and the ultimate destruction of the Temple and complete subjugation of the land by 70 AD.

Another such “false Messiah” was Simon Bar Kochba, who claimed to be the Messiah, and who led a rebellion in 132 AD. He was momentarily successful, until once again the Romans, under Hadrian, laid waste to the country and so utterly destroyed and dismantled Jerusalem that the city was completely rebuilt and renamed, as Aelia Capitolina.

Jesus mentions earthquakes and famines. There are numerous earthquakes in the region. Two such quakes, one in the 300s and another in the 600s, caused horrific destruction, from which the country never fully recovered. There is also a record in the Gospels of a less destructive but still noteworthy earthquake which struck during the time of the Crucifixion itself. There is seismic evidence that this quake was centred in the Dead Sea.

As for famines, these were also distressingly frequent. There was a severe famine as a result of a major Nile flood in 45 AD – Egypt was the “breadbasket of the Empire,” and the following years were exceedingly difficult. The Apostle Paul speaks often of special offerings taken up to relieve the Jerusalem famine. You can see how Jesus' words were very applicable for the people of the day!

It is important to take note that Jesus speaks of all these signs as a “beginning,” not as an end. ***“but the end is still to come”*** he says; ***These are the beginning of birth pains.*** A new

world order is coming – and indeed did come. And the faith will move out from Jerusalem to points farther than the disciples can imagine.

***Mark 13:9 “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.***

Jesus often speaks of the disciples spreading the Gospel throughout the whole world – to “all nations.” But the spread would not be easy – they would face great resistance from their own faith, which regarded Christianity as an increasingly dangerous and radical sect – and once out from under the protection afforded the Jews by the Romans, Christians would be persecuted by the State as well.

***Mark 13:12 “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. 13 Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.***

By the end of the first century, the Roman government turned against Christians. Families were pressured to report anyone who was not loyal to Caesar. Within some Jewish families, loved ones would believe their relatives who followed Jesus had joined a dangerous extremist sect and left the faith. Because of a misunderstanding of what communion was, some mistakenly believed Christians were cannibals!

***Mark 13:14 “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. 15 Let no one on the housetop go down or enter the house to take anything out. 16 Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. 17 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 18 Pray that this will not take place in winter, 19 because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again. 20 “If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them.***

Jesus is speaking directly to the Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and particularly to the Church in Israel and Jerusalem. The key to understanding these verses is in figuring out what Jesus means by "the abomination that causes desolation." The phrase comes from the Book of Daniel, to which Mark may be referring when he inserts the words, "let the reader understand."

In Daniel it's clear "the abomination that causes desolation" occurs in the Temple, a sacrilege in the Temple that is so appalling the Jews abandon it. Jesus says the disciples will see it "standing where it does not belong." To understand what this abomination might be, we need a bit of history – back to the Rebellion of 66-70 AD.

After the time of Jesus, the difficult political atmosphere in Judea and Galilee got even worse. The Zealots pushed for Jewish freedom until A.D. 66 when they convinced Jews to initiate a full-scale rebellion. Fanatically caught up in their cause, the Zealots moved into the Temple and made it their fort. Jews who opposed their insurrection were slaughtered – accounts from the day say that as many Jews were killed by Jews as by the Romans.

According to Josephus, the Zealots treated the Holy of Holies as just another room. They murdered some of their "prisoners of war" in the Temple. Offended by how corrupt the previous temple leaders were, the Zealots satirically ordained a clown named Phanni to be the high priest, and set him up in the Holy of Holies.

First-century Christians believed Phanni was the “appalling sacrilege standing where he did not belong.” They did what Jesus told them to do and fled for the hills – many not to the hills of Judea, but beyond, to a mountain town called Pella in Jordan. Unfortunately, other people followed Jewish tradition and stayed in Jerusalem.

Bishop Eusebius, in the early 300s, wrote of this time: *“The whole body, however, of the church at Jerusalem removed from the city and lived at a certain town beyond the Jordan called Pella. Here, those who believed in Christ removed from Jerusalem, as if holy men had entirely abandoned the royal city itself and the whole land of Judea.”*

In A.D. 70 a Roman general named Titus marched thousands of soldiers into Jerusalem and slaughtered the Jews that remained. In a hopeless last stand, the Zealots took shelter in Herod's massive Temple. Titus set fire to the place. The Romans stoked the fire so hot it made the marble stones crumble and the golden roof melt into the masonry. All the Zealots perished, save for a group that fled to Masada. The Temple was utterly destroyed.

Those Christians who heeded the warnings of Jesus survived, returning to Jerusalem by 90 AD or so, and rebuilding their lives as best they could. There is compelling archaeological evidence that they even built a Christian “synagogue church” on Mount Zion, on the very location of the building in which the Last Supper was held. There is also evidence that they continued to visit the site of the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

***Mark 13: 21 At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. 22 For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and***

***perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. 23 So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.***

Jesus warns his followers to be watchful and discerning, and to not fall for those who would deceive the faithful, for power or for profit. A very early Christian “manual of belief,” the Didache, or “Teaching,” warns of this too:

*“Let every apostle who comes to you be received as the Lord. But he shall not remain more than one day; or two days, if there’s a need. But if he remains three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle goes away, let him take nothing but bread until he lodges. If he asks for money, he is a false prophet. Whoever says in the Spirit, “Give me money,” or something else, you shall not listen to him. But if he tells you to give for others’ sake who are in need, let no one judge him.”*

***Mark 13:24 “But in those days, following that distress, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; 25 the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’***

Jesus, as Mark often records, quotes his favorite prophet, Isaiah, in speaking about how the world of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism – and Christianity! – will soon be utterly changed. Isaiah’s words referred to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians; Jesus speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans:

*Isaiah 13:10 - The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.*

*Isaiah 34:4 - All the stars in the sky will be dissolved and the heavens rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree. (there’s that fig tree again!)*

***Mark 13:26 “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. 27 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.***

This quotation has caused much debate. Jesus was clearly speaking about the imminent destruction of the Temple, yet now he seems to be speaking of his return in Glory. The Early Church assumed that would be sooner rather than later – the Apostle Paul in his early letters writes to churches expecting a swift return of Jesus, while in his later letters is already modifying his advice for a “longer haul.”

Some people believed that those who were already dead might miss out on Jesus's return. So Paul reminds them that *"the dead in Christ will rise first"* (1 Thessalonians 4:16) and then, *"we who are alive, who are left, will be caught together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord"* (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

We can see in John's Gospel this tension and uncertainty, addressed in the final chapter (John 21:2-23): *Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Because of this, the rumor spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"*

*Mark 13:28 "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. 29 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*

Jesus clearly says, "This generation will not pass away" until this takes place – clearly now understood as the destruction of the Temple, rather than his return. He is answering the question posed by the Disciples way back at the beginning of the chapter.

*Mark 13:32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. 34 It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. 35 "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. 36 If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. 37 What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"*

Jesus now seems to be speaking both of the time of the destruction of the Temple – about which he has been somewhat specific – within a generation (40 years). But now he seems to be looking ahead to the time of his Return – the Second Coming. The parable doesn't make sense only in the context of the Roman invasion, but does in the context of his return.

The lesson either way is the same – Watch! Remain alert! Be about the Master's business! Continue to faithfully share the Gospel to all the corners of the earth! Ultimately, despite the difficult days ahead, God is in control! Jesus will return!