

Week of November 30th Guide – Mark 13.14-37

- Read each daily Devotional Reading using the SOAP method and Daily Devotional to help you reflect.
- Read the article below prior to group
- Think through the small group and accountability questions after the article

Devotional Readings

Sunday	Isaiah 64:1-9
Monday	Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19
Tuesday	1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Wednesday	Mark 13
Thursday	Psalms 100
Friday	Ephesians 4:17-32
Saturday	John 3

Article: Further Signs of the End & Watching for the Son of Man - Mark 13.14-37

by N.T. Wright from *Mark for everyone* (England: London : SPCK, 2001.), 180-188.

Mark 13.14-27 - Further Signs of the End

When Albert Schweitzer, the great medical missionary, theologian and musician of the early twentieth century, was a young man, he studied the organ in Paris under Charles Marie Widor. One day in 1899 Widor confessed to Schweitzer that he couldn't understand Bach's chorale preludes. The mood of the music kept shifting unpredictably.

'Naturally,' replied the young Schweitzer, 'many things in the chorales must seem obscure to you, because they can only be explained by the texts that go with them.' Schweitzer was right. Widor hadn't known that the chorale preludes were designed to go with particular Lutheran hymns. Once you understood the texts behind the music, the music itself became clear.

We meet the same problem in the middle of Mark 13. Mark begins with something so obscure that he adds a note — 'let the reader understand!' — which shows that he realized that not all readers would understand. Throughout, you can only make sense of what's going on if you know, as it were, the texts behind the music — in other words, the scriptural echoes and allusions that make up a good deal of the passage. Before we begin to unravel these texts and echoes, we must remind ourselves that the chapter began with questions about the fall of the Temple. So far, in verses 5—13, Jesus has warned his followers not to panic at the various things that will happen in the coming days. Even when put on trial for their lives, they are not to assume this means that the Temple is at last to face its doom. The end is not yet.

But now in verse 14 the mood changes. Up until this point they are to stand firm; now, at a given signal, they are to take to their heels. Something will happen that will tell them it's time to run — to run without looking back, without picking up belongings, to flee so quickly that those with young children will have difficulty keeping up. That's the moment when a disaster is coming upon Jerusalem that will make all the previous woes of the world, and all that will ever be, look tame by comparison. What is Jesus talking about? And what is the sign? He is talking about the moment when foreign armies will take over the Temple. We, with historical hindsight, know that this happened in AD 70. We can read, in the historian Josephus, the terrible tale of the siege of Jerusalem; how people starved, ate their own babies to stay alive, fought each other both for scraps of dirty food and for small-scale political gains in the factional fighting, more Jews being killed by other Jews than by the invading Romans. Jesus clearly wanted his followers to get out and run. There was no place for misguided national loyalty, for staying to the bitter end of that appalling time.

The sign is 'the desolating abomination': an appalling object or person whose presence signifies imminent destruction. The text behind this is Daniel 11.31 and 12.11, which speaks of pagan armies invading Jerusalem, stopping the regular sacrifices in the Temple, and setting up instead 'a desolating abomination'. Jesus doesn't seem to know what precisely this might be, but it sounds like a pagan idol, an image to another god in place of the one true God, set up in the middle of the Temple. This will be the sign that it's time, not to stay and be patient, but to get out and run.

It will also be a time when deceivers will run riot and lead many astray. Again, Josephus tells us of many would-be messiahs, many prophets, during the Roman—Jewish war of AD 66—70. They were offering rescue, trying to gain a following, promising signs and wonders. They all came to nothing.

But the climax of it all — the destruction of the temple itself - can only be spoken of through prophetic words, summoning up the image of cosmic catastrophe. Consider what was happening. In the year AD 69 one Roman emperor succeeded another — four in all, Nero, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian — each time with violence, murder and civil war. And as Vespasian made his way to Rome to receive the crown, his adopted son Titus entered Jerusalem, burnt the Temple, destroyed the city and crucified thousands of Jews.

What language could one use to describe such a year? It won't do simply to list the events, ghastly though they are. The only way of doing justice to such a time is in prophetic language, used originally (in

Isaiah 13.10 and 34.4) to describe the fall of Babylon and Edom: the language of a dark sun and a quenched moon, of stars falling from the sky.

This is not a prediction of 'the end of the world' though many in Jerusalem at the time must have wished it was. Had it been the end of the world, what would have been the point of running away so frantically? No; but it was the end of their world, the close of the way of life that had failed, by the combination of injustice towards those inside and revolutionary violence towards those outside, to obey God's call to be the light of the world.

By the same token, the fall of the Temple would be the sure sign that God had vindicated Jesus as the true representative of his people. As a prophet, Jesus had predicted its destruction. As Messiah, he had solemnly enacted it. He had hinted at an even stronger reason: the Messiah was identified with David's Lord, who would sit at God's right hand until those who had opposed him were defeated. Now he brings in the final devastating biblical text: Daniel 7.13. 'They will see "the son of man coming on clouds with great power and glory".'

In Daniel 7 itself, this is not about the return of 'the son of man', but about his 'coming' to God after suffering. It is about triumph and vindication, and about simultaneous judgment falling on the system that has opposed God's call and God's gospel; and about Israel's representative sitting down, as David's Lord does in Psalm 110, at God's right hand. From Jesus' point of view, in other words, it concerns that vindication of his entire program and mission which God will bring to pass, after his own death, with the destruction of the Temple that has come to symbolize all that his gospel opposes. From Mark's point of view, it is about the complete vindication of Jesus: his resurrection, his ascension, and the outworking of his prophecies against the Temple as sealing the whole process.

What else must happen during those times? The establishment of a mission that, unlike Jesus' own, will now reach out to the Gentile world with the news that the creator God, Israel's God, has made a way of salvation for all — has done through Jesus what the Temple should have stood for but had instead opposed. Jesus' messengers will go out to the whole world, where God's chosen ones (a typically Jewish way of describing those who would come to believe the gospel) await the good news.

It is vital to read this passage as containing Jesus' prophecies, fulfilled 40 years later, against the Temple. That is what Mark, at least, believes this whole chapter is about. But we should not suppose that there are therefore no messages for our own day, nearly 2,000 years later. Where human societies and institutions set themselves up against the gospel and its standards, producing arrogant and dehumanizing structures, deep injustices and radical oppression, there may once more be a place for prophets to denounce and to warn, and for God's people to get out and run. If we do not find ourselves in that position, we should be grateful; but we should remember to pray for those, even today, who do.

Mark 13.18-37 - Watching for the Son of Man

Most modern Western houses don't have a doorkeeper. It's up to the owners to lock up, and perhaps set burglar alarms. But in some big cities, over the last few years, there has been quite a change. Many people now live in apartment buildings which employ a full-time guard by the main entrance. Where I live, there is a succession of courtyards, and by the outer one there is a gate, with people on duty 24 hours a day. They see everyone who enters or leaves. This is how it would have been with a great house in Jesus' day.

The thing gatekeepers have to do above all, of course, is to stay awake. This is the warning Jesus issues so solemnly to his followers, as they face the troubled time that's coming upon them, upon Israel, upon Jerusalem, and indeed in a measure on the whole world.

The first level of meaning, clearly, is once more about the imminent destruction of the Temple; this is the subject of the entire chapter. Jesus' main concern is to warn his followers of the signs that will immediately herald the end — the end of the Temple, the end of the Jewish national way of life up to that point. (After AD 70, the Jews set about reconstructing their way of life around the law, rather than the Temple; but even the law contains detailed regulations for Temple worship as a standing reminder of how things had been.)

Unlike the fig tree two chapters earlier, which suffered from having leaves but no figs, Jesus now uses the image of a fig tree in leaf, signaling that summer is almost here, as an illustration of how his hearers are to react. They need to watch for the crucial events, especially the arrival of pagans taking over the holy city and the Temple itself. That will be the sign of the end. The terrifying sentences at the end of the parable of the wicked tenants is amplified here in chapter 13: the vineyard owner will take the vineyard away and give it to others (12.9). The 'others' as far as chapter 13 is concerned, are foreign, pagan armies, trampling the holy places. When that happens, the end is not far away.

And Jesus is quite clear that this will take place within a generation. That, of course, is only logical. If it's true that he is the last in the line of the prophets, the son who comes to the vineyard as the last possible messenger that the father can send, there can be no one else to come after him. Knowing that this generation would see it all was not a matter of special insight, so much as a straightforward deduction from his own strong sense of vocation. The generation that rejects his message — as it was doing — must be the generation upon whom the end will fall. This warning is backed up with one of Jesus' most solemn assurances: his words will stand, though all else may pass away.

Jesus, however, does not know the precise day or hour. He, the 'son does not know it, because only the Father does. This statement is remarkable. It implies that normally son and Father work very closely together; speaking of Jesus and God in this way is very unusual in Mark (though common in, say, John). But it also presses a sharp distinction between the two. Jesus knows a great deal, but he does not know this. Like a good deal of Jewish thought on God's control of history, this implies that God has planned the right time for all these events to take place. But unlike a good deal of 'apocalyptic' writing, ancient and modern, which tried then, and tries now, to figure out precise timings for events, reducing biblical prophecy to the level of a horoscope, this passage insists on leaving the issue to God.

The resulting command, then, is not 'sit down and work out a prophetic timetable' — always a more exciting thing to do — but 'keep awake and watch'. The little church in the first generation cannot afford to settle down and assimilate itself either to the Jewish or the pagan world. It must constantly remind itself that great events are afoot, that terrifying times are just ahead. Paul's letters clearly reflect this same sense of a brooding, imminent crisis.

But what does this mean for us, who look back on the events of AD 70 as a distant tragedy? Partly, it is important for us simply to absorb the once-for-all significance of the moment in history when this great transition took place. Christians increasingly need to realize that unless we understand the first century we will not understand our own times, or what sort of people we ourselves are called to be.

But it is also important for us to remind ourselves of our own call to watch, to be alert. The judgment that fell on the Temple is a foretaste, according to other passages in the New Testament, of the judgment that will fall on the whole world. This time there are to be no signs (despite the regular attempts to speculate on such things), no advance warnings. Just the ongoing command to God's people in Christ to be faithful to him, not to compromise with the standards and fashions of the present age, but to keep awake, watching, as Paul again says, for the day to dawn, in whose light the dim flickering candles of the present age will be needed no more.

About the author: N.T. Wright is Bishop of Durham (Church of England) and was formerly Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey and dean of Lichfield Cathedral. A graduate of Oxford University, he previously taught at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), and *The Resurrection and the Son of God* (2003) are the first three volumes of his projected six-volume series entitled *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (SPCK/ Fortress Press). Among his many other published works are *The Original Jesus* (1996), *What Saint Paul Really Said* (1997), and *The Climax of the Covenant* (1992). He is the author of the For Everyone commentary series.

Small Group Questions

Accountability

Apostolic Mission - Are you learning to be intentional about sharing Jesus with neighbors? Are you praying for a 3:1:M friend? How are they doing? Are you reaching your group and individual goals in this area?

Open / Scripture

1. Who like riddles, and puzzles? What are your favorite types of puzzles? What do you like about them?
2. What kinds of things make a good puzzle difficult to solve?

Observation

1. In Mark 13.4, Peter, James, and John ask a two part question that becomes the subject of all of chapter 13. What are the "these things" that they are referring to in their questions? (Mark 13.1-3)
2. What are the two questions that they ask him? What events do both of these questions focus on?
3. Which of these two questions does Jesus answer in Mark 13:14? What is the answer to that question?
4. What parallels are there between Isaiah 13:10; 34:4, in its description of the fall of Babylon and Edom, and that of the fall of the Temple in Mark 13:24-25?
5. Contrast Mark 13:26 with Daniel 7:13-14. What further insight does the prophecy in Daniel give to what Jesus is talking about?
6. Which one of the two questions does Jesus answer in Mark 13:28-32? What is the answer to that question?
7. How many times does Jesus use the phrase, "Stay Alert" in Mark 13:33-37?

Apply

1. We are told in numerous passages in the scriptures of a final judgment that will come like a thief in the night. In light of Jesus' warning to "stay alert" in reference to the coming judgment on the Temple, what would it mean for us to stay alert in reference to the coming judgment?
2. Daniel 7:14 says that the Son of Man has an eternal authority. The Gospels tell us this King also loves you so much to die in your place. What does "staying alert" mean in light of his radical Love, and awesome authority? In what ways have you become numb? What about our culture and lives causes us to be numb to this reality?