

THE KING'S VISION

Mark 13

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Twenty-one Christians beheaded by ISIS earlier this month in Libya.¹ Seventy churches burned in Niger last month after the Charlie Hebdo massacre.² Hundreds if not thousands of Christians killed last year in northern Nigeria by Boko Haram.³ Christian brothers and sisters all over the world are being persecution for their faith in Jesus. Why?

Graeme Wood's cover story in the March issue of the Atlantic says that what ISIS wants is to foment an all-out global showdown with Christians, in order to bring about the second-coming of Christ.⁴ ISIS believes, according to Wood, that when Jesus comes he will kill the antiChrist with a spear, and then he will lead Muslims to victory over the whole earth.

At the same time, many evangelical Christians in the West see the rise in persecution as a sign of the end times. They read the headlines and then point to passages like Mark 13 as evidence that the antiChrist has taken over the world, and that Jesus will soon come to rapture his church from this present darkness.

The Bible doesn't teach that Christians will be raptured up into heaven out of the midst of an end-times cataclysm. The wild schemes of the rapture-mongers (e.g. *Left Behind*, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, etc.) owe more to Hollywood than to the Bible. The simplest and clearest way to understand what the Bible teaches about the future is to agree with the historic creeds and our weekly affirmation: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

But what are we to do with Bible passages like Mark 13? And what do they have to say to the world's Christians, who are being persecuted by their enemies in such horrific ways? If God is all-powerful, why does he allow such terrible things to happen to his children? Let's take a look at Mark 13 and find out.

¹ See the "21 Martyrs" video here: <http://youtu.be/a7KzxMBxHVU>

² "70+ churches destroyed as 'anti-Charlie' protests spread in Niger." *WorldWatch Monitor*, January 20, 2015.

³ "Boko Haram Has Killed at Least 2,053 Civilians in First Half of 2014, Watchdog Group Says." *Christian Post Africa*, July 16, 2014.

⁴ Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants." *The Atlantic*. March 2015.

JESUS' VISION IS CONSISTENT WITH HIS TEACHING AND MINISTRY

Jesus Christ: impressive leader, wise teacher, powerful miracle worker. In Mark 1-12 we've seen Jesus do some pretty amazing and miraculous things. While the words and actions of Jesus at times have been challenging, Mark's overall portrait of Jesus has been winsome and compelling. Yet when we come to this chapter—to Mark 13, with all its apocalyptic imagery—it feels like Jesus has gone stark raving mad.

If you'll step back and consider this chapter in context, you'll see that the Jesus of Mark 13 is quite consistent with the Jesus we've been following all along. Mark 13 begins with Jesus and his disciples leaving the temple, where they have been for several chapters. The temple has been the central focus of Jesus' teaching and ministry since entering Jerusalem. In Mark 11, Jesus shut down the temple, condemning it because for centuries it had failed in its mission. It was not a house of prayer for all nations, but instead had become a den of robbers, so Jesus shut it down. Then Jesus silenced the leaders responsible for the temple. The quarreling factions that ran it—the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes—all were outfoxed by Jesus in Mark 12. Finally, in Mark 13:1, Jesus left the temple never to return.

As they were leaving, one of the disciples said to Jesus (13:1): “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” And indeed they were. The scope of Herod the Great's public works is hard to fathom. His accomplishments throughout Israel were grand and massive, and of all his projects, the temple was by far the greatest. It was considered by many people in that day to be the most beautiful building in the world. The grounds themselves were the size of twelve football fields, all on a raised platform well over a hundred feet high, with a huge underground city beneath it. The buildings themselves were spectacular and ornate. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Jesus' disciples were in awe of everything they saw.

Jesus, however, wasn't impressed. In Mark 13:2, instead of agreeing that the Temple was awesome, he predicted its destruction saying, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

Doom and gloom for the temple sounds so out of character for the meek and mild cartoon Jesus we often prefer. Yet it's consistent with Jesus' teaching thus far in Mark's Gospel. Again, the destruction of the temple is the only thing Jesus has been talking about for the last several chapters. His comment in 13:2 is consistent with his past teaching.

Not only so, but the rest of what Jesus says in Mark 13, no matter how scary it may sound, will have continuity as well. In our study of Mark 12, Jesus said in the temple is that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and the second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself. Even though Jesus predicts wars and disasters and persecutions in Mark 13, nothing he says contradicts the ethics of loving God and neighbor.

Not only is Mark 13 consistent with Jesus' *teaching*; it's also consistent with his *ministry*, i.e. what Jesus came to do. He is the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, the last and greatest sacrifice, who died that we might be cleansed from sin, once and for all. We shouldn't be surprised that here, on the verge of his crucifixion, Jesus promised that the old temple, with its

old sacrificial system, would be shut down.⁵

In summary, Jesus' vision put forth in Mark 13 is absolutely consistent with his teaching and ministry in the rest of Mark's Gospel.

MUCH OF JESUS' VISION HAS ALREADY BEEN FULFILLED

Then Jesus sat down opposite the temple on the Mount of Olives, and his disciples asked, (13:4) "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?"

Beginning in Mark 13:5 and continuing through to the end of the chapter, Jesus provided his disciples with his vision statement. It was a farewell address of sorts, telling the disciples what to expect in four stages: birth pangs, dangerous mission, the fall of the temple, and the expansion of his kingdom.

Jesus began with a vision of *birth pangs* in vv 5-8. In those days, childbirth happened at home in the village, rather than in some private chamber at a hospital. So Jesus picked a very familiar image in order to describe how momentum would build before the destruction of the temple. In particular, he said that there would be false messiahs (v6), wars (v7), and natural disasters (v8).

Then in vv 9-13 he presented a vision of the disciples' *dangerous mission*. Their objective was nothing short of (v 10) the gospel of God's Kingdom being proclaimed to all nations. But as they went out to share the good news, they would face persecution, being beaten in synagogues (v 9), testifying before governors and kings (v 9), betrayed by family members (12), and widely hated because of Jesus (v 13).

Then in vv 14-23, Jesus presented a vision of the *destruction of the temple*, starting with a phrase that Daniel used three times to describe the same thing, namely, the "abomination of desolation." Jesus said in v 14, "When you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be"—(let the reader understand)—then head for the hills. In the rest of the paragraph Jesus emphasized the urgency of flight as soon as the abomination of desolation was in place. Don't go inside to get your valuables, don't go back for your jacket, etc. Just run.

Who do you think said, "Let the reader understand," in v 14? It wasn't Jesus. He was talking to his disciples. Perhaps it was Mark. Or perhaps it was a copyist writing after the destruction of the temple, who couldn't help adding a "nudge nudge wink wink" comment in the margins. In any case, it's an important word for us today, because it underscores that much of Jesus' vision has already been fulfilled. As readers we need to understand that all of what Jesus described in vv 5-23 was fulfilled within a generation after the first Easter. In fact, most all of it except for the destruction of the temple is recorded for us in the New Testament book of Acts. In Acts there are

⁵ Contrary to the Bible's teaching of Jesus being the final sacrifice for sin, rapture theologies envision a new temple in Jerusalem and the resumption of animal sacrifices there. Why in the world would Christians want to see that? What could be more anti-Semitic than recreating the den of robbers as an alternative to Jesus?

earthquakes and famines, false messiahs, and uprisings, beatings and persecutions, as the disciples undertake the dangerous mission of sharing the good news of Jesus with the world. By the end of the book of Acts, the Gospel has spread from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and all the way to Rome, i.e. the end of the earth.

But Acts was completed prior to the destruction of the temple. That history is recorded elsewhere, by Josephus (among others). In Israel beginning in 66 AD, there was a massive Jewish uprising against the Romans, called the Great Revolt. And what followed was a long campaign by the Romans to stamp it out, working systematically across Galilee in the north, resulting in 100,000 Jews being killed or sold into slavery. By 70 AD, Jerusalem was the only city that remained under Jewish control, and so the future emperor Titus besieged it, and finally conquered it, after an extremely bloody campaign. When he finally entered the temple, then let the reader understand, that he became the abomination that causes desolation. They looted the temple, burnt it to the ground, leveled the stones, and then brought back all its beautiful treasures to Rome, entering through a massive victory arch built in Titus' honor, and the model for other similar arches in cities around the world.

There are many archaeological sites in Israel today that testify to the brutality of the Romans during that time. One of the greatest ones is Masada, another amazing structure built by Herod the Great, and the site of the last standoff between the Jews and the Romans. If you're ever able to visit these places, then you'll understand why Jesus said to head for the hills, and to pray that it didn't happen in winter, etc. If it hadn't been for the missionary expansion of the church already throughout the Roman empire, it might not have survived the catastrophe that happened in Israel under Titus.

Much of Jesus' vision has already been fulfilled. All of what Jesus envisioned in vv 5-23—the birth pangs, the dangerous mission, and the destruction of the temple—happened just as he said. All of it is verifiable through both written accounts of the period (secular and Christian), as well as the archaeological evidence.

WE CAN BE CERTAIN THAT WHAT REMAINS OF JESUS' VISION WILL BE COMPLETED

Over the centuries, Christians have interpreted vv 24-27 in many different ways. The way I understand it, Jesus envisioned the global *expansion of his kingdom* following the destruction of the temple, and he used figurative language from the Old Testament to describe how it would unfold. Vv 24-25 come from Isaiah's prophecies about God's conquest of pagan kingdoms. The original prophecies used figurative language (e.g. the sun and moon being darkened, stars falling from the sky) in order to describe the overthrow of empires. Consequently, it's safe to assume that Jesus used these expressions figuratively as well. (Not unlike recent news reports of France being “shaken to the core” by the Charlie Hebdo massacre.)

In 13:26 we find the famous image of the “Son of Man”⁶ coming in clouds, taken from the end of Daniel's vision of four empires that rise and fall prior to the reign of the Messiah (Daniel 7).

⁶ One of Jesus' favorite self-designations in Mark's Gospel was “Son of Man.”

Most interpreters understand Daniel to have been talking about the rise and fall of the Babylonians, Medo-Persians, Greeks, and Romans. As Daniel envisioned, and Jesus concurred, the “Son of Man” would begin his reign in the midst of the Roman empire. And indeed, isn’t this what happened in history, as Christianity began to spread during the Roman empire? The church has been growing and spreading ever since, as the messengers (or “angels” as the ESV translates it) of Jesus gather in his followers from the four corners. Jesus will continue to reign until that day when every knee bows and every tongue confesses him as Lord. Then heaven and earth will meet, and the work of New Creation will be complete.

As we’ve already noted, so much of Mark 13 is verifiable ancient history. For this reason, we can be confident that the remainder of Jesus’ vision will be fulfilled. That hope of the return of Christ is something we ought to hold on to, and put our hope in, whenever we face brokenness, or injustice, or evil of any kind. Not only will Jesus return to judge the living and the dead, but we also will all rise and join him on the last day.

KEEP WATCH

So what does all of this have to do with the Christian life today? I want to draw your attention to two practices Jesus teaches his followers in Mark 13: discernment and imitation.

First, with regard to *discernment*, did you notice the frequency of Jesus’ commands to keep watch or keep awake throughout this chapter? This is something new, something Jesus hadn’t really emphasized very much before Mark 13. It represents a transition to maturity for the disciples, because discipleship involves both hearing and seeing. In the Bible, the ear is the instrument of learning, the eye is the instrument of discernment. As a child you must begin with the ear, and it requires humility to listen quietly and learn. But once you have gained wisdom through listening, then you can use that wisdom to interpret what you see with your eyes. Wise interpretation is the work of discernment, a task for mature disciples.

In Mark’s Gospel Jesus makes only two long speeches, once in chapter 4, and then again here in chapter 13. The speech in chapter 4 began with the parable of the sower, and then several other parables about the kingdom of God, and what tied all of Jesus’ teaching together was *the importance of hearing God’s word*. Thirteen times in Mark 4 Jesus emphasized the necessity of listening. Now thirteen times in Mark 13, Jesus emphasized *the importance of keeping watch or keeping awake*. Why? Because that’s what mature disciples do. They observe with their eyes, and evaluate what they see in light of the wisdom they have gained through hearing God’s word. In other words, they practice discernment.

Jesus is calling us to this level of maturity. We never stop listening and learning; we simply add the discipline of keeping watch and discerning. So, e.g. if you’ve met your neighbors and shown them hospitality, and you’ve been praying for them, then don’t fall asleep. Keep watching to see how the Lord acts. Perhaps he sends other Christians into their lives, or maybe they become interested in reading the Bible, or maybe they have some need for prayer. Stay awake, keep watching, so that you can discern what God is doing and keep in step with the Spirit.

Second, in addition to discernment, Jesus teaches us in Mark 13 to imitate him. Did you notice how often in this chapter Jesus referenced things that had already happened or would later happen in his story? Here are four examples:

- Jesus talked about the fig tree in leaf in v 28, which you may recall is what they saw as they entered the temple gates back in Mark 11.
- Jesus mentioned the master leaving his servants in charge in v 34, which you may recall is the parable he told against the Sanhedrin in Mark 12.
- Jesus emphasized in v 35 the need to stay awake through the four watches of the night, which the disciples won't be able to do in the Garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14.
- The third watch (v. 35) of the night—cockcrow—came after Peter denied Jesus three times.

Jesus was weaving repeated reminders to keep watch together with bits and pieces of his final days in Jerusalem. Why? He wanted the disciples to stay awake and share these experiences with him, so that in future years, as disciples shared similar experiences, they would be able to do so as a way of fellowship with the risen Lord. The persecution that Jesus said would accompany the missionary expansion of the kingdom would not be limited to the time before the destruction of the temple. It would continue all the way until the return of Christ. And every time we or other Christians encounter persecution, we should do so with discernment, in order to understand it in terms of following Jesus' example. In other words, whenever Christians experience these things, they should be able to remember and say, "We're going through what Jesus went through."

Daniel DeVougas writes:

Although Christ experienced great persecution, it was unto a greater glory, a grand eternal purpose, and a promotion that would never be taken away again. Being Christ's disciples, we follow His example—and the path to glory ahead of us is well-worn. As Christ suffered and was persecuted, so too, we, His followers, will experience some level of suffering and persecution in this life. Jesus told us that persecution would come for His Name (cf. Matthew 10:16-24; 24), but He also called us blessed if we endured it: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven..." (Matthew 5:10-12).⁷

Keep watch. It's about more than just waiting to see when Jesus returns. It's about seeing our own experiences in light of the greater story of redemption. Whether we're suffering at the hands of Islamic militants, or a tyrant boss at work, we have the opportunity to walk the *Via Dolorosa* with Jesus, sharing in his suffering, and anticipating the joy of salvation in his name.

⁷ Daniel DeVougas, "Persecuting God's Beloved: Making Sense Of Christian Persecution Before The Eyes Of A Loving And Omnipotent God." February 18, 2015. <https://onebodyprayers.wordpress.com/2015/02/18/persecuting-gods-beloved-making-sense-of-christian-persecution-before-the-eyes-of-a-loving-and-omnipotent-god/>

Discussion Questions

1. In the 1st Century AD, the Jerusalem temple was the largest and most spectacular edifice in the Middle East. It also was the most important symbol in Judaism, akin to the symbolic role of the Capitol building in Washington for all the United States. Discuss what the destruction of the temple would have signified for people living at that time.
2. There is widespread agreement among biblical scholars that the Gospel of Mark was completed prior to 70 AD. (Most evangelical commentators believe that it was finished around 55 AD.) Dan Claire suggests that “Let the reader understand” in Mark 13:14 was added by a copyist after 70 AD. Why?
3. Interpreters differ on whether to understand Mark 13:24-27 as a reference to the beginning of Jesus’ reign (concurrent with the destruction of the temple) or the return of Christ at the last judgment. Dan Claire took the former view because of Mark 13:30. What do you think?
4. Compare Mark 4 and Mark 13. What do you learn about listening and seeing from Jesus’ two speeches in Mark?
5. How do the flashbacks and foreshadowings of Jesus’ story in this chapter anticipate ways that believers will re-live Jesus’ story in their own lives? How should we keep awake/keep watch in the face of persecution today?