

Mark 13, The Olivet Discourse
13:24-37, Coming and Comfort
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Overview

1. The Lord's response to the disciples' question has three movements.
 - a) 5-23, Conflict. An elaborate chiasm
 - 1) Warns believers against two sources of attack:
 - a> Deception by false Christs (the carrot)
 - b> Persecution (the stick)
 - 2) Establishes our mission of being a witness, even in persecution.
 - b) 24-27, Coming of Christ, "After that tribulation." This, not the destruction of the temple, should be the focus of their attention.
 - c) 28-37, Comfort. Again chiastic. Two parables to remind them that these events are sure; some will happen soon, others at a time not known in advance. Admonition: "Watch," *grhgorew*. Stay awake. Be ready for the Lord's return.
 - 1) In the Conflict section, watchfulness was wrt the opposition
 - 2) Here, it is for the true Christ.

A. 24-27, Coming: The Return of Christ

Three sections, each introduced with a time statement.

1. Preparation: nature darkened
 - a) 24a, Time: The Lord Jesus explicitly teaches that his return will be "after" the unprecedented tribulation described in 14-20, "in those days" (thus not a long delay later).
 - 1) This is the only explicit time that the scriptures assign to the return of Christ.
 - 2) Pretrib rapture rests on theological grounds, not the explicit teaching of scripture.
 - 3) Believers should expect trials and tribulations, and "endure unto the end," be completely steadfast, trusting in God to control even the most severe persecutions (20) and vindicate their testimony with the glorious return of his Son.
 - b) What happens: darkening of the heavenly bodies as a sign of God's judgment.
 - 1) Imagery: comes from Gen. 1:16, the fourth day of creation,

in which God "turns on" the sun, moon, and stars. Now, in an act of "uncreation" and judgment, he turns them off.

- 2) Joel 3:15, God's final judgment against the earth. May be the earliest writing prophet; at any event, eschatological reference.
 - 3) Two prophets use the image of God's judgment on single nations, perhaps in the same way that the Lord uses the civil strifes of Mark 13:7-8 to foreshadow the eschatological ones of 14-20.
 - a> Isa. 13:10-13, the fall of Babylon
 - b> Ezek 32:7, the defeat of Pharaoh under the Persians.
 - 4) Rev 6:12-13, once again eschatological, the judgments of Christ's return in answer to the cry of the tribulation martyrs for vengeance.
- c) Why it happens: Just as a jeweler lays out a black velvet cloth to show off a diamond, so the Lord will darken all the earth, the better to show off the glory of Christ's appearing.

2. Execution: Christ glorified

- a) Time: "And then"
- b) "They shall see": it will be publicly obvious.
- c) The description is from Dan. 7:13,14: "Son of Man," "clouds," "glory." "Power" here is *dunamis*, which in LXX Dan means either "army" or "mighty person," not an abstract, but *exousia* there probably conforms to it here. The Lord is describing the point at which he receives the kingdom from the Ancient of Days, as prophesied in 7:14, cf. the angel's interpretation in 7:27.

3. Gathering of the elect

- a) Time: "And then," still after the tribulation
- b) Gathering of the elect; the rapture.
- c) Note in particular the reference to both heaven and earth; may be the seed from which 1 Thes 4:16,17 comes, "the dead in Christ" coming from "the uttermost part of heaven," and "we which are alive" coming from "the uttermost part of earth."
- d) Worth noting "meet" in 1 Thes 4:17, *apantesis*, which regularly means to go out to greet someone as they come to you, and to accompany them back in. Cf. the Roman believers' greeting Paul in Acts 28:15, or the virgins greeting the coming bridegroom in Matt 25:6, or the demoniac meeting the Lord in Mark 5:2, or the servants meeting the father as he returns home in John 4:51. The angels assemble the elect to accompany the Lord as his army in Rev. 19.

B. 28-37, Comfort

The discourse ends, as it began, with a chiasm exhorting alertness and centered on speech.

1. The Conflict chiasm

- a) exhorted believers to be alert in the face of their adversaries' tactics (deception and persecution)
- b) so as to maintain a faithful testimony (center, v.11).
- c) Seven layers: Warning, Deception, Social Strife, Warning, Persecution, Witness.

2. The Comfort chiasm

- a) exhorts them to be alert for the Lord's return
- b) in view of his faithful teaching (center, v.31).
- c) Five layers: Exhortation, Parable, Exhortation, Moral, Teaching.

1. 28a, Exhortation

- a) "Learn" is imperative, a command. This parable is not optional. They must pay attention.
- b) Both "fig tree" and "parable" are definite: "From the fig tree learn the parable." As though each item of nature has its lesson hidden for the discerning eye to enjoy. Cf. Solomon's proverbs, which draw spiritual insights from ants, greyhounds, coney, . . . Cf. Job 12:7-8, "But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: 8 Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee."

2. 28b, Parable

- a) The phenomenon: in the spring, the bark of the fig tree becomes soft and velvety as the leaves bud out.
- b) Compare our family's eager anticipation of maple syrup season, as a sign that the peak of the winter has past and summer is on its way.
- c) Generalization: the natural seasons are not haphazard, but follow a regular pattern, which the alert eye can discern. Even without counting months or knowing a date, when broken branches start to drip sap, we know that summer is on its way.

3. 29, Exhortation

- a) "Know" is imperative, a command. "Know that it [the Lord's return] is near." Like summer, his return is part of God's cycle of time, and the attentive believer will not be taken by surprise.
- b) What are the "these things" that will come to pass?
 - 1) Dispensationalism:
 - a> Fig tree = Israel
 - b> Budding of the fig tree = rebirth of the nation Israel (a theme nowhere in the context)
 - c> So rebirth of the nation is sign that the Lord's return

is approaching.

- 2) This analysis is defective in two ways:
 - a> The Lord nowhere says that his coming depends on the fig tree's leaves.
 - b> This approach divorces the parable from the context and makes it (and the explanation) stand alone.
- 3) Seems more reasonable to seek for "these things" in the the previous context. "When ye shall see" appears twice in the chapter, here and v.14, referring to the abomination of desolation.

4. 30, Moral: the time is near

- a) Like the fig tree, the "generation" has been sadly abused by dispensational teachers, notably Hal Lindsey in *The Late Great Planet Earth*, who concludes that since a generation is about 40 years and since Israel was reestablished in 1947, Christ should have returned in 1987.
- b) Again, we should always turn to the context for interpretation. What does "generation" mean in Mark?
 - 1) Mr 8:12 And he sighed deeply in his spirit, and saith, Why doth this generation seek after a sign? verily I say unto you, There shall no sign be given unto this generation.
 - 2) Mr 8:38 Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.
 - 3) Mr 9:19 He answereth him, and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him unto me.
 - 4) A "generation" is those who occupy an "age," Luke 16:8. "This generation" consists of those who inhabit this present evil age (Gal. 1:4). It lasts, not for twenty or forty years, but throughout the entire age.
- c) Thus the Lord is teaching that the unbelief and sinfulness of the present age will persist until the fulfillment of the things prophesied in 5-23.

5. 31, Certainty of the Lord's Words

- a) This is the center of the chiasm, the point of focus, and corresponds to the center of the first chiasm. Both are concerned with words. There, the believer is the channel for the Lord's witness to unbelievers. Here, the Lord shows himself to be the source of unfailing words.

b) The saying echoes several OT passages, and by doing so, places the Lord Jesus on the level of God:

1) Ps 102:25 Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens [are] the work of thy hands. 26 They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed: 27 But thou [art] the same, and thy years shall have no end.

2) Isa 51:6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath: for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner: but my salvation shall be for ever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished.

3) Isa 40:8 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

c) Thus believers who see the coming time of trouble are not to be faint-hearted, for we have the Lord's promise that his coming is near, and his word will not fail.

6. 32, Moral: the time is unknown

a) Going into the chiasm, the emphasis was on the certainty of the Lord's return and its general relation to the signs that anticipate it. Coming out, the theme is our ignorance of the exact date. Our recent March weather is an excellent example. We've had warm days and cold nights, dripping sap, and crows flocking, so we know that spring is on the way. However, we've also just had a devastating ice storm that left 330,000 people without power in subfreezing temperatures.

b) It is the Father's pleasure to reserve the knowledge of the exact date to himself alone. Not even the Son, whose preoccupation is with doing the will of the Father, knows that exact date.

Structural note: this last "exhortation, parable, exhortation" is more complex; a third exhortation is embedded in the middle of the parable, which together with the shift from third to second person has the effect of merging the two together.

7. 33, Exhortation

In the light of this uncertainty about the precise time ("for ye know not..."),

a) Take heed. "Look." Keep your eyes peeled, like the sea captain's wife on the roof of her house, watching for the sails of her husband's ship on the horizon.

- b) Watch. "Stay awake." Don't fall into a careless slumber, thinking that his return won't be for a long time. Many believers are effectively asleep in this world.
- c) Pray. The sea captain's wife was out of touch from her husband for years at a time. We have the privilege of constant communication, to strengthen us in the face of the world's opposition.

8. 34, Parable

The Lord compares himself to a householder who leaves his household in the care of his servants.

- a) To all of them he gives authority to do their work.
- b) The parable singles out the porter.
 - 1) 2 Kings 7:11, the person in the king's house you contact if you need to waken the king at night.
 - 2) 2 Kings 4:6 (LXX), someone whose slumber permits a murderer to gain entrance into the house.
 - 3) John 10:3, the one who turns out the sheep into the care of the true shepherd.
 - 4) John 18:16,17, the one who challenged Peter at the door of the High Priest's house.
- c) The porter's job: stay awake. This person is the ancient equivalent of a security system. A guard, responsible for watching the weakest point of the house (the door), challenging those who come, warning of danger, admitting those with legitimate business.

9. 35, Exhortation

The Lord shifts back to exhortation. We as believers are to be on the lookout, watching and waiting for the Lord's return, turning away false claimants to his authority (the deceivers of 13:5-6, 21-23).

10. 35b-36, Parable

How terrible should the porter be found sleeping on his post! In the military in time of war, this action is punishable by death, because it jeopardizes the security of the entire force.

11. 37, Exhortation

Once more: Watch. Stay awake and alert. Don't let the world lull you into its irresponsible slumber.