

Harold Camping, a radio preacher from Northern California, became known for predicting the end of the world in 2011. He proclaimed, “May 21st, there’s going to be a terrific earthquake; way bigger than anything the earth has ever experienced, and that will be the beginning of Judgment Day.” (Harold Camping) He was so convinced he invested \$100 million into an advertising campaign to spread the news. But May 11 came and went, and nothing happened. He then updated his theory—October 21 would be the date. That day passed as well. It would take Camping until 2012 to confess, “We humbly acknowledge we were wrong about the timing.”

In Mark 13, Jesus himself makes some bold predictions. This, by the way, is one of the hardest passages in the entire Bible to interpret. I approach this passage with humility. No scholar has perfectly unraveled all the knots. I won’t either. But I want us to look at the broad strokes and nail down things that are clear. I simply want to ask three questions of this text: What does Jesus predict? Why is this so important? What should we do about it?

Let me start by providing some context to Mark 13. This is the final week of Jesus’ earthly life. He’d come into Jerusalem a few days earlier and immediately entered the temple courts and began overturning the tables of the money changers. He said, “*This is supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations, but you’ve made it a den of robbers*” (Mark 11:15-17). This made the religious leaders furious, and they began to plan his death. But the next day, Jesus came back to the temple, and there was yet another confrontation with them. So there’s a lot of tension leading up to this chapter, and much of it centers around the temple. As chapter 13 begins, Jesus is leaving the temple; it feels like he’s turning his back on it for the last time. And it’s almost as if his disciples sense this. Grasping for straws, they point back to the temple. As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “*Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!*” (Mark 13:1). It’s like, “Hey, photo op. Let’s gather around and take a picture!”

What Does Jesus Predict?

But as Jesus responds to this statement, he makes two stunning predictions, and they’re closely related. First, he predicts the destruction of the temple. This is what he’s mainly talking about in verses 1-23. Second, he predicts his glorious return, which is the focus of verses 24-27. What makes this chapter challenging to interpret is these two events are closely related in that the destruction of the temple foreshadows the Second Coming. Some

of the things he predicts around the destruction of the temple also anticipate his Second Coming. It’s like looking out on the horizon and seeing two mountain ranges, one behind the other. But you can’t really tell how far apart they are. In the same way, Jesus looks into the future and kind of conflates these two events, which again makes it tough to interpret.

The Destruction of the Temple

Let’s look at the first prediction. He says, “*Do you see all these great buildings?*” replied Jesus. “*Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down*” (v. 2). The disciples must have been stunned! The temple was one of the great wonders of the Roman world. It had been under reconstruction for 46 years. It was a breathtaking site. The Jewish historian, Josephus, called it “a mountain of gold.” Some of its stones were as large as a Greyhound Bus. And it represented all the Jewish people stood for and valued. Jesus said it would literally be leveled—not one stone left on another! For us, this is like taking a tour of Washington DC, and then someone saying, “Do you see the White House, the Lincoln Memorial, the Federal building? They’ll all be leveled!” It’s not just the buildings that make this so shocking, but what they represent.

You can understand why a bit later, as Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives with a dramatic view of the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew want to know more: “*Tell us, when will these things happen? What’s the sign we should look for?*” (v. 4) Jesus responds: “*Watch out that no one deceives you...you must be on your guard*” (vv. 5, 9). Why? False Messiahs will appear. There’ll be wars and rumors of wars. There’ll be famines, earthquakes, persecution—even by your own family members. But all these things, he says, are not the end, so don’t panic; they’re just the “beginning of birth pains.” Finally, in verse 14, he gives them the sign they asked for. He calls it “the abomination that causes desolation.” This term comes from the book of Daniel (9:27). It describes a sacrilegious act in the temple. It had already happened once about 150 years earlier, but it would happen again. He says, when you see this, run for the hills!

What’s amazing about this prediction is Jesus went so far as to predict when this would happen. That’s what he does down in verses 28-31, where he points to how the budding of the fig tree means summer is near and says,

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. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. vv. 28-31

The keywords, repeated twice, are "these things." He's referring back to the destruction of the temple. The disciples had asked in verse 4, "When will these things happen?" In other words, when will the temple be destroyed? Jesus says before this generation passes, these things will take place.

And guess what? He was right! Everything Jesus described here happened over the next few decades. There were false Messiahs, wars, earthquakes, and persecution. And then, in AD 70, the Romans invaded Jerusalem and ordered the temple razed to the ground. The Roman General, Titus, entered the temple and committed sacrilege. Soldiers then gutted it by fire and literally pulled the stones apart to reclaim the melted gold. Josephus reported that Jews fled the city "as swimmers deserting a sinking ship."

So, at the very least, you can say Jesus was an amazing prophet! No one would have called this! And the fact this happened just as he said it would is meant to assure us his second prediction is equally as certain.

His Glorious Return

Starting in verse 24, an entirely new paragraph begins in which Jesus looks out even further into the future and makes another prediction: *"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.'"* (vv. 24-25) Jesus clearly says after another period of intense tribulation, there'll be some kind of disturbance in the sky. He uses "apocalyptic language," much of which was borrowed from the Old Testament prophets, graphically describing some kind of violent change in the natural order. You've heard of natural disasters. Well, these are UN-natural disasters.

We don't know how long that will go on, but amidst this universal upheaval, Christ will appear unmistakably. "At that time people will see (notice he doesn't say, "you will see" because this would not happen in their generation) 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" (vv. 26-27) How different will his Second Coming be from his first? I think most of us like the story of his first coming better. You know, how he came as a meek and lowly baby. Who doesn't love that? But here he comes with power and glory, and there's not just one beautiful star in the sky, but the stars are falling out of the sky! His angels are dispersed to gather his people from the ends of the earth.

But if you look closely, there's something wonderful about this! Jesus says he'll return "in clouds with great power and glory." He doesn't come through the clouds or on top of them, but he'll come back "in (with) the clouds." This is important because it

points us back to the Old Testament. Think about it, when God appeared to his people, how did he appear? He appeared in the form of a glorious cloud. When God led his people out of Egypt, he appeared in a cloud of glory. When he gave Moses the Law on Mt. Sinai, there was a cloud of glory. When the temple was dedicated, that cloud was there again. Jesus returning with this "glory cloud" is a sign God will come to dwell with his people, not in the temple but in Jesus. And the whole earth will be his temple! He'll undo all of the ugliness and pain caused by the sinfulness of humanity. Jesus' return means the permanent return of the glory cloud. It's what John describes in Revelation as the "new Jerusalem," where *"There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away"* (Rev. 21:4). Isn't that wonderful!

What does Jesus predict? Two things: The destruction of the temple and his glorious return. The first prediction was fulfilled in AD 70. The second prediction we're still waiting for. But the first foreshadows the second. And the fact the first one was fulfilled so perfectly gives us confidence the second will be as well.

Why Is This So Important?

Now the second question is this: Why is this so important? Maybe you're thinking that this Second Coming business is just a little extreme. Maybe you're wondering if you really need to believe this to be a Christian. I mean, Christians have been waiting for his return for over 2000 years, and it never happens. Jesus was a great man, but maybe he just got this wrong.

But if Jesus got this wrong, then he's not who he said he was. Consider this: There are 318 references to Jesus's second coming in the New Testament. That means about 1 out of every 13 verses mentions it. This isn't just a peripheral doctrine; it's central to our faith. This is something all Christians everywhere have always believed. The Nicene Creed says, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

Others say, "Jesus wasn't really talking literally when he pointed to his second coming. He's just saying that his Spirit will come back, or his teaching will come back. We shouldn't take this so literally." But notice what Jesus said in verse 26, *"At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."* Jesus says people will actually see him with their own eyes. You can't spiritualize this. Again, the physical return of Jesus to this planet isn't a little footnote to Christian theology that we can spiritualize away; it's essential to our faith. Without it, the credibility of Jesus is demolished.

But still, others question this by saying, "Doesn't this lead Christians to really crazy, fanatical things?" Yes, there've always been people who take this idea and run off to some wilderness hideout, holing up like hermits, waiting for the end. They want to calculate a date because they want to know when to start

liquidating their assets, running to the hills, and storing up their ammo and dry goods. All this to be ready for the end. But Jesus tells us in plain language this is foolish because no one knows the day or the hour of his return! Even Jesus himself doesn't know! Look again at verse 32, *"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."* I think that's pretty clear, don't you? It's amazing to me how many people think they know more than Jesus!

So the answer to the second question, "Why is this so important?" It is because the integrity of Jesus hangs in the balance. We do not know when, but we do know what; we know history will be consummated with his glorious return. He told us that in plain language, over and over again.

What do we do about this?

And this leads to the third question, what do we do about this? If it's really true, if Jesus really wanted us to be ready for this, how shall we then live? Let me summarize what Jesus says we should do in light of this with one word: Watch! Look again at how Jesus closes this sermon. In verse 35a, *"Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back"* (v. 35a). And then at the very end in verse 37, "What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" The word literally means "to stay awake." What does it mean for us to stay awake? The word does not mean to stare into the sky and watch for his return. It's not passive watching like a semi-retired man lazily working as a security guard in a place where nothing ever happens. That's not what Jesus means when he says, "Watch." Rather, it's an active waiting; it's all about staying spiritually and morally awake.

Why do I say this? Well, first, go back to what I said earlier about him coming in/with the clouds, bringing his glory to earth. Think about our world today. My goodness, there's so much pain, so much death, so much brokenness, so much evil and injustice. But the glory of God will remove all of that and bring beauty, life, human flourishing, and the renewal of the earth! And here's the deal: If we really believe this, we won't run for the hills. We'll be more engaged with this world, not less engaged. Like Jesus says in this mini parable at the end of his sermon,

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. "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. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. vv. 34-36

Our "assigned task" is to stay awake and work for those things that will contribute to God's ultimate purpose. And so, when Jesus says "Watch," it's more like the kind of watching you do when a really, really important person might make a visit to your home any time. Imagine your favorite United States President

writing you a personal letter telling you he's going to make a visit to your home. He can't say when, but he is coming! What do you do? Well, you're not passive; you're active! You're preparing. You're keeping your house clean! You're doing the things you'd want him to "catch" you doing when he comes. You certainly don't fall asleep because he could visit at any time! That's what Jesus means by "Watch!"

Now doing that will play out in at least three ways: First, we'll be more passionate about evangelism and more compassionate towards those in need. In light of Tim Keller's passing a few months ago, it would be right for me to quote him here.

If you long for Christ's appearing, then you long for the conditions that will accompany that appearing. What are the two basic things that will happen when he comes back? 1) He will be known—every eye will see him, all will know his truth—and 2) it will be the end of death, disease, injustice, suffering, and hunger. Therefore, if you care about the second coming...that will make you passionate and compassionate to do the same two things. You want everyone to know him, and you also want to see the end of suffering and disease, and injustice. And as a result...anyone who longs for the appearing of Jesus is eager to do good—eager to call people to believe and eager to love and sacrificially serve everybody, whether they believe or not. That is what makes you compassionate and passionate. (Tim Keller)

Isn't that great? Are you compassionate towards those who suffer? Are you passionate about reaching others and this whole world with the gospel? Remember what Jesus said in verse 10, "The gospel must first be preached to all nations." He really cares about that. Do we? Because without the gospel, people are lost; people are doomed.

Second, we'll be more committed to personal holiness and integrity. I love what the apostle John said about this,

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. 1 John 3:2-3

My wife Lynn has one of those make-up mirrors. When you turn the ultra-bright light on, and you see your magnified face in the light, you see a bunch of flaws. I do, anyway. Lynn's face is perfect! But "watching" means keeping that bright light on our own lives, addressing those things that need change, and submitting those to the Lordship of Christ.

A couple of years ago, we were on vacation when our daughter called us. She'd been checking on our house and said something smelled really bad. I mean really bad. She could hardly go in the house it smelled so bad. She looked all over the place and found

nothing, so we decided there must be something dead under the house. We called a pest control guy. This guy absolutely loved his job. In fact, he called himself “The Rat Guy.” Sure enough, he found a dead rat underneath our house. But here’s the deal—he told us to fix the problem; you can’t just remove the dead rat. You have to also plug up the little holes on the side of the house where the rats enter. If you don’t plug up the holes, there’s just going to be more smelly, dead rats under your house.

Here’s the deal: Jesus is coming back, and you don’t want to be found with a smelly, dead rat in your life. Part of what “watching” means is being proactive in addressing the sin issues in our lives. Not just removing the rats, but plugging up the holes, even the little ones, where bad stuff enters. It can be something like a little bit of resentment towards someone, a bit of gossip, a bit of lust, or just a little white lie. As someone once said to me a long time ago, don’t dabble with sin; deal with it!

Third, watching will mean we have hope that brings great comfort. I love what the apostle Paul writes. He’s talking about the return of Christ and how we’ll meet the Lord and be with him forever. Then he says, *“Therefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thess. 4:18)*. Does this promise of his return bring you comfort? One of the challenges we have living where we do and when we do is our lives are pretty good. Don’t get me wrong. We all experience brokenness, and we all encounter suffering at some level. But compared to other people in other places or at different times, we have it pretty good. And because of that, sometimes we don’t really long for his coming the way we should.

You see, this is a promise that all of the pain and suffering in our lives won’t last forever. But if you don’t have much pain or suffering, why would you care? Neal Plantinga says, “The return of Christ is good news for people whose lives are filled with bad news.” If you live in South Sudan today and this hope gets a hold of you, it’ll bring you so much comfort. If you’re living out your days on a cancer ward and this hope gets a hold of you, oh, what comfort! If you’re a woman in a culture where it’s okay for your husband to beat you up, you don’t yawn when someone mentions the return of Jesus. You long for the coming of the kingdom because the coming of the kingdom depends on the coming of the King, and the coming of the King means justice will, at last, fill the earth. That’s why for those of us who live in such a bubble as we do, it’s so important to find ways to enter into and identify with the suffering of others.

But do you know what the most comforting thing about this hope is? It is that before Jesus returned as Judge, he was judged.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

Listen to The Heidelberg Catechism, written way back in 1563 for Protestants. It starts with this question: “How does it comfort you that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead?” Listen to this answer:

In all my sorrow and persecution with uplifted head I look to heaven, and in sure hope await as judge the very one who has offered himself to God’s judgment already in my place, and so removed from me the whole curse...

Isn’t that great? I tell you, that comforts me. He is the Judge, but he’s also the Judge who was judged...for us. And when you come to grips with the fact that the Judge of all the earth, the only One who ever lived without a blemish in his heart was judged for you; he took your place, then in this important doctrine of the Second Coming, it will give you the greatest comfort.

So let me again just leave you with this one word, “Watch!”

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