



THE END OF LABOR

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Mark 13:14-37

37th Message

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We have reached the holy season of Advent, the time when Christians celebrate our Lord's birth, when we sing wonderful carols like *Joy to the World* and *Silent Night*. But we can easily miss the complex emotions that accompanied the first Advent. We forget that danger, sorrow, flight and death accompanied the joy, birth and new life of the earth-shaking events surrounding the birth of Christ. We rejoice over the one child born in Bethlehem but forget the multitude of little ones massacred there during that same year. Sacred birth took place in the context of deplorable death. The closest I ever came to experiencing these feelings was the time when a close friend went into labor on the same night that her two-year-old son choked to death on an almond. As her son drew his last breath, she delivered a baby girl. For me, November 4th 1976 became a sacred day to remember life and death. Just a month later, we laid our little girl in the grave, and the very next day, December 5th, we heard the marvelous news that we would be able to adopt a baby in two weeks. Sorrow and joy commingled down.

In the thirteenth chapter of Mark's gospel these same emotions are present in the imagery that Jesus uses to describe the establishment of his kingdom on earth. The forty years following his death and resurrection would throw the entire ancient world into severe labor pains. In our last study we examined what we called the beginning of labor. This involved natural disasters, wars and rumors of wars and severe persecution for the disciples. We come now to the end of that labor process, which would climax in the most severe pains in the history of the world. This tribulation would simultaneously bring about two things: the death of the old order and the birth of the new. In this text we will learn that God's most precious gifts come at the greatest price.

I. The Sharp Pain: The Great Tribulation (13:14-23)

A. What to Watch For (13:14)

"But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he should not be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Jesus has already told the disciples that all the things which he referred to in verses 5 through 13 are the "beginning of labor," (birth pangs), but now he identifies the "severe pain" that is a prelude to judgment. When you see that, says Jesus, "flee to the mountains." He is referring to well known expression "*the abomination that makes desolate*," a term that is used four times in the book of Daniel (8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). This image was familiar to the Jews. It evoked painful memories of the time when Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B.C. "erected an altar to Zeus over the altar of burned offering, sacrificed a swine on it, and

made the practice of Judaism a capital offense."¹ With that as background, Jesus tells the disciples that when they see "the abomination of desolation standing where he should not be," (Mark adds, "let the reader understand," i.e., let the one giving the public reading give the interpretation to the congregation), then they were to flee.

Two possibilities exist as to the identity behind this image. The first is the arrival at Jerusalem of the Roman army led by Titus, in 70 A.D. As the army surrounded the city their military standards, bearing the image of an eagle over the imperial bust, an idolatrous image to the Jews, were clearly visible. When they saw this image they would know that Jerusalem was doomed. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that when they saw it, it was already too late; there was no time to flee. It appears to me that the better interpretation is that it was Israel's own abominations, not the arrival of the Roman army, that polluted the land and caused the Lord to depart (Jer 7:10,30, 34).² This is the consistent message of Jeremiah (Jer 4:1-8; 44:22) and Ezekiel (Ezek 5:11-15). When the zealots took over the temple as their headquarters, they carried out a number of extremely disrespectful acts. They interrupted the sacrifices, shed innocent blood, and held a mock installation of their own high priest, Phannias (Jos. Wars IV, 147-57 [iii.6-8]; Ant. 10.11.7).³ Any spiritually sensitive Jew observing this occurring in the holy place would be horrified. Josephus accused: "You are crying out for deliverance because you do not wish the Temple to be desecrated and yet how could they do any worse than what you have already done? You have desecrated the temple!" When they saw this occurring, many Christians evacuated the city as early as 68 A.D. The temple had been defiled. Destruction was imminent.

B. What to Do and Why (13:15-20)

"And let him who is on the housetop not go down, or enter in, to get anything out of his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! But pray that it may not happen in the winter. For those days will be a tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never shall. And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect whom He chose, He shortened the days.

Jesus gives the disciples explicit instructions that once the temple had been defiled, destruction would follow fast and furiously, and everyone was to flee immediately with no second thoughts or diversions. Those sitting on the rooftops, where many spent their time in the cool of the day, were not to go down but rather flee like fugitives from roof to roof to evacuate the city. People in the fields were not to go home to retrieve their cloaks but take the

most direct route out of Jerusalem. Such an evacuation would be especially dreadful for pregnant women and nursing mothers; thus Jesus warns couples who planned on starting families then to reconsider or relocate (Hos 13:16, Josephus *Ant.* 14:13.7-8). Then Jesus tells them to pray that this might not happen in winter, when rain-swollen wadis flooded roads, rendering a quick escape almost impossible. Such an exhortation gives great dignity to prayer, which can move an Almighty God.

The reason for such solemn warnings was that the tribulation which was about to be unleashed upon Jerusalem would be unparalleled in its severity. (By the way, this is a clear indication that this is not the final “tribulation,” since Jesus expected many more to follow.) So severe would it be that the Lord would have to set a limit to its length in order to preserve the elect (Gen 18:22,23; Isa 65:8; Dn 12:1). Many scholars have been disturbed by this saying. How could the tribulation of A.D. 70 compare to the horror of the Holocaust, when six million Jews died in Nazi death camps? How could it compare to the death of twenty million people under Stalin, or the utter destruction of Hiroshima by the atom bomb? The tension can be addressed in one of two ways. Either Jesus was speaking in hyperbole to make his point (Rikk Watts), or, as Carson says, “There have been greater numbers of death, but never so high a percentage of a great city’s population as thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the fall of Jerusalem.”⁴ Both views have merit, but I prefer the former, since Jesus has already used hyperbole in the text (“*not one stone shall be left upon another*”). This was a common way of making an emphatic point in the ancient world.

In any case we should not underestimate the savagery and horror of what was about to come upon Jerusalem (Josephus *Wars* V, 424-38 [x.2-3]). Josephus recorded that there were about three million Jews in the city for Passover. Of those three million, 1.2 million were either killed or enslaved. The greater part of those visiting Jerusalem found themselves shut in by the Roman army. The holy city had become a prison. With all food and water supplies cut off, they endured a fierce famine and raging pestilence. The dead were everywhere: in the upper rooms, along the lanes and in the alleys. There was no place to bury them. Lamentations and groanings filled the night air as looters stripped the dead of their remaining dignity. The silent city became a sealed tomb. Conditions were so severe that many hoped the Romans would break through the walls and put an end to their misery.

The most horrific scene, one that left even the hardest of men reeling, involved that of a young mother killing and roasting her infant son. Josephus wrote that when several starving men smelled the cooking of meat, they rushed upon the woman and demanded to see the food she was hiding. She replied: “This is mine own son, and what has been done was mine own doing! Come, eat of this food; for I have eaten of it myself! Do not you pretend to be either more tender than a woman, or more compassionate than a mother; but if you be so scrupulous, and do abominate this my sacrifice, as I have eaten the one half, let the rest be reserved for me also.” (Josephus, *Wars* 6.3.4) Stabbed with horror, the starving men staggered out, trembling at what they had witnessed. The complete accounts of Josephus, which are too horrific to tell, give weight to Jesus’ terrible words prophesying a tribulation so severe

that had the Lord not shortened those days, no one would have survived. Thus, during this terrible time the disciples could look for God’s sovereign, climactic intervention to bring an end to the trouble.

Next, Jesus adds another warning to guard against further deception.

C. What to Guard Against (13:21-23)

“And then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ’; or, ‘Behold, He is there’; do not believe him; for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order, if possible, to lead the elect astray. But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance.

Jesus declares that during this critical hour many false prophets would arise and use this time of stress as an opportunity to herald their “anointed ones,” promising vain hope of liberation from Rome. As John the Baptist bore witness to Jesus so these imposters would bear witness to their false messiahs. And they would seem to have divine authorization, with signs and wonders backing their claims. But these powers would be demonically inspired to lead even the elect astray, if possible (Deut 13:1-5; Rev 13:13). One such so-called prophet was Simon bar Giora, who entered Jerusalem with 40,000 followers and was greeted as savior and guardian (JB 4.574-8).⁵ Another was Theudas, the prophet “from Egypt.” Once again, the imposter is perennial, but the elect are to remain strong. As Carson says, “Christian faith involves the sober responsibility of neither believing lies nor trusting imposters.”⁶ Though these false messiahs and wonder workers would deceive many, the disciples would be fully prepared because Jesus had told them everything in advance. And by contrast, the appearance and swift departure of the imposters would give more weight to the authority of the apostles and the trustworthiness of their gospel. The same truth abides through the ages. This is why the apostles were careful to teach that the credentials for leaders are not to be determined by signs and wonders, but by holiness of life and purity of doctrine.

In summary, the Lord has told the disciples precisely what to look for (“the abomination that makes desolate”); exactly what to do (“flee Jerusalem”); and what to watch out for during this “severe tribulation” (false Messiahs with false hopes of liberation). Once again we observe how pastoral and practical this material was for the apostles.

Now Jesus describes the climactic event that everything has been leading up to. The end of this severe labor will simultaneously bring about a complete destruction of the old Jerusalem and a new creation of the people of God under the Son of Man.

II. The End and the Beginning (13:24-27)

A. The End of the City (13:24-25)

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken.

At this point we might expect Mark to say, “Then, after that great tribulation, Jerusalem will be destroyed,” but instead, he uses apocalyptic imagery, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars

will be falling from heaven.” Why does he adopt such imagery that on the surface sounds like the end of the world? The reason is that this kind of language was used by Israel’s prophets to describe the “earth-shattering” implications that would accompany the destruction of dominant world forces, whether a ruler as proud as Pharaoh (Ezek 32:7-8), a city as great as Babylon (Is 13:10), or a nation as secure as Edom (Isa 34:4-6; cf. Joel 2:10,31; 3:15). When the prophets described the overthrow of these mighty powers they did so in apocalyptic imagery. The reason, according to Tom Wright, was that these events were so “earth-shattering” that “end-of-the-world language is the only set of metaphors adequate to express the significance of what will happen.”⁷ This is the kind of language we grope for when we are stabbed with inconsolable sorrow and we hunger to invest space-time events with eternal significance. When my newborn son was dying, I remember looking out upon the sun setting over the ocean. The only words large enough to give voice to my soul were, “The sun is going out. My life will never be the same.”

So now that “earth-shattering” language used to describe the complete destruction of Babylon is redirected against Jerusalem, with the same intensity. The powers in the heavens are shaken; a new cosmic order has begun. No longer will Jerusalem and its temple be the spiritual center of the world. Henceforth the center will be Jesus and his new temple, with these twelve disciples as the new foundation stones (Rev 21:14). At Pentecost, Peter used exactly the same imagery to capture the earth-shattering significance the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out upon the disciples would have in the history of the modern world. It was nothing less than a cosmic new creation (Acts 2:20)!

B. The Enthronement of the New King and His People (13:26-27)

“And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

With the final destruction of Jerusalem the disciples would see what Daniel described as the vindication of the Son of Man, enthroned in the heavens. Daniel’s prophecies held great fascination for the Jews as they looked for the coming kingdom. The prophet portrayed Israel’s enemies as wild beasts looming on the horizon: First, a lion, then a bear, then a winged leopard, and then a fourth too terrible to describe (Dan 7:3-8) would rise up out of the sea with ravenous appetites, seeking to devour God’s people. But the terror would be put to rest by a man-like figure who would tame these animals, like a new Adam (Gen 2:19, 20), and set up an eternal kingdom.

**“I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
And to Him was given dominion, glory and a
kingdom,
That all the peoples nations, and men of every
language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed.”**
(Dan 7:13,14)

Amazingly, Jesus adopts this imagery for the destruction of the temple. Israel and her rulers had become like one of the beasts opposing the rule of God. But they had now been overthrown by the Son of Man, who is enthroned in the heavens. Thus, “the coming of the Son of Man” is language that describes Christ’s everlasting rule from heaven, destroying forces opposing his rule. The apostles would use this imagery to include Christ’s final overthrow of evil at the Second Coming (Rev 1:7), but the terminology is broader than its final manifestation. Here we see his vindication manifest in the destruction of the city, an event which Jesus at his trial told the high priest he would see in his lifetime (Mk 14:62).

The next verse follows precisely Daniel’s imagery.

“And then He will send forth the angels (or ‘messengers’), and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth, to the farthest end of heaven.

Not only is the Son of Man firmly established in his rule, but that rule is shared among God’s elect, with people from every nation coming together as one under the rule of the Son of Man. The gathering of the elect represents the fulfillment of Israel’s ancient hope of the gathering of scattered Israel (Deut 30:3; Isa 11:12; 27:12,13; 60:1-9; Zech 2:6). Again, I believe the imagery is more fluid than fixed. The apostles understood it on multiple levels. First, they received a foretaste of it on the day of Pentecost. Next, it would be followed by worldwide evangelization carried out by his “messengers,” who operated under the care of angels, until the final day when the last trumpet call is given by the archangel at the second coming (which scholars refer to as the “rapture”). The point of the imagery in this context is the establishment of not only a new king enthroned in the heavens, but a new people of God, made up of all races and nations, who serve this king, the Son of Man.

So, just as is the case with physical birth, when the death of the old life-support structures of the womb and the placenta occur simultaneously with the birth of new life, now we have the death of old temple and city, followed by the vindication of the Son of the Man and his kingdom.

Jesus concludes his amazing discourse with three words about the timing of that day and the responsibility of the disciples to “watch.”

III. Watching the Timetable (13:28-32)

A. The Day is Imminent (13:28-29)

“Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door.

Jesus ends his discourse now with excellent advice for the disciples about observing the times. First, he says, a careful observer will be able to know with certainty the season. Merely by looking at the tender branches and leaves of the fig tree, every Jew in Israel knew when summer was approaching. So too the disciples would clearly know that when they saw these things the destruction of the city was near: it was right at the door.

Jesus continues:

B. The Time is Bound (13:30-31)

“Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.

Secondly, says Jesus, not only would they know when the season had arrived, they would know its approximate time limit. These things would all take place within this generation (about forty years). So sure is Jesus of this fact he stakes his entire credibility on this statement: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.” Thus, however we interpret the fulfillment of what Jesus has said, we must somehow land “all these things,” not just some of them, as occurring within the lifetime of that generation. This has been a major factor in my interpretation of the text. So the season will be clear and its time limit sure.

But there is something that the disciples would not be able to determine.

C. The Hour is Unknown (13:32)

“But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

Thirdly, though they may know the season, and its outer limits, they would not be able to determine the day. No one knows that, not even the angels or the Son, only the Father. It is the same with childbirth. Every mother knows when her labor is close, and that it is bounded by about 40 weeks, but no doctor can predict the day of delivery.

Jesus explains that there is a very important reason for this mystery.

D. The Need to Watch and to be Responsible (13:33-37)

“Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is. It is like a man, away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Therefore, be on the alert-- for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or in the morning-- lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all, ‘Be on the alert!’”

The reason for their not knowing the exact time is that mystery heightens responsibility. The point cannot be overstated. Three times Jesus repeats his command to be “on the alert.” He was like a man who was leaving on a journey charging his trusted staff with important responsibilities: they were the doorkeepers to the new temple, in charge of all the master’s precious possessions. The very fact that they were unaware of the precise time of his return ensured that he would know who was responsible and who was not. It is a credit to all the apostles that they took these words seriously. They labored wholeheartedly and faithfully throughout their generation. They were not sleeping in 70 A.D. when the destruction came, but were using their gifts to the full as faithful doorkeepers to the new temple.

How should we respond to this text? I find myself strangely gripped with the same conflicting emotions I experienced in December 1976, with sorrow and joy commingled down.

IV. Sorrow and Joy Commingle Down

A. The Crushing Weight of Judgment

First, we find that judgment is the strange work of God. He takes no delight in it, for his delight is salvation. Therefore, he carries out judgment with extreme reluctance. By the time faithless Israel fell under its curse, most of its inhabitants were in their 70’s or 80’s. They were given up to their very final days to repent. But sadly, most did not do so, and when judgment came it arrived with a severe finality. I believe Jesus emphasized the severity of this tribulation because he wanted every generation to feel the weight of their choices as exemplary of what lay in store for those who refused the gospel. Being in hell will be like being held captive in a city under siege, shut up in a sealed tomb inside a community that devours one another -- surrounded by people, yet totally alone.

Because we are made in the image of God we have tremendous dignity. Our choices count. This is more dignity than we want at times. But God will not remove it, and if we resist him for a lifetime, our choices will seal us in hell forever. And so this event of the great tribulation becomes typological of the final judgment:

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.” (2 Pet 3:10)

B. The Grandeur of the New Creation

If we are a bit reluctant to feel the weight of judgment, perhaps we are bit shy at entering into the grandeur of this new creation. Once again, the use of apocalyptic imagery to describe this new birth means that the significance of these historical events is incalculable. The new creation so outshines the old it cannot be measured in space-time language. It is nothing less than a new creation. Do we really believe that? Does the installation of the Son of Man on his heavenly throne, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the completion of the New Testament and the establishment of the new temple, his church, really change the structure of the universe? Jesus says it does. And I believe him (Heb 12:18-24). Amen.

1. D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 500.
2. This is Rikk Watts’ position from his outline on this material from Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.
3. Special thanks to Bob London for his help and research on the Josephus material for this text.
4. Carson, 501.
5. Quoted by Watts.
6. Carson, 503.
7. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 208.

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