



THE BEGINNING OF LABOR

Catalog No. 1137

Mark 13:1-13

36th Message

Brian Morgan

November 28th, 1999

In the thirteenth chapter of Mark's gospel we come now to the end of what we have termed five controversy stories. In Mark 11, Jesus entered the temple as its true owner and king. Following his rejection by Israel's leadership he pronounced judgment upon them and established his supreme authority over all. Every challenger, every opponent was silenced and shamed. In the midst of the blaze of this controversy, Jesus emerged as the Son of God (the true Israel), Isaiah's suffering Servant, David's greater Son, and Malachi's Lord of the Temple who would destroy the existing temple and build a new one in its place.

These amazing claims would be downright blasphemous were they not true. As this high court drama concludes now, the disciples will get a clear picture concerning what all of this means to them. How gracious of our Lord to spell out the implications of these events for the disciples! While many have described this text as mysteriously apocalyptic, I find it to be straightforward and pastoral in nature. Though it is replete with Old Testament prophetic allusions its main thrust is pastoral: it is designed to prepare the disciples for the events that are about to take place, and to secure them in their role.

The chapter has five divisions:

1. The Announcement of the Destruction of Jerusalem (1-2)
2. The Beginning of Labor Pains (3-13)
3. The Great Tribulation (14-23)
4. The Presence of the Son of Man and Vindication of the Suffering Saints (24-27)
5. Final Warnings Concerning the Day (28-31).¹

We will examine the first two divisions today, and conclude with the final three next week.

Before we come to the text, I want to confess that I am still growing in my understanding of how to interpret it. Therefore, what I offer I do so humbly, knowing there is a great divergence of opinion among scholars regarding these verses. The point of confusion revolves around how much of this material is related to the destruction of the temple, in AD 70, and to what extent Jesus is speaking of his second coming. How shall we find coherence between these two events? The method I have adopted is to look at these verses first, in the context of the book of Mark, in other words, strictly from the disciples' point of view. What did Jesus' statements mean to the twelve? Before we try to unravel the meaning of the text we have to find what it meant to the apostles, within the larger context of Mark's gospel. Once we discover that we can apply it typologically, which is to say that what God did in AD 30-70 in Israel can be seen as a type or microcosm of what occurs among the nations in the history of the world. It is my

opinion that this is how this text shaped the apostles' view of Jesus' return.

I. Jesus Announces the Destruction of the Temple (13:1-2)

And as He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another which will not be torn down." (NASB)

As Jesus and his band leave the temple area one of his disciples is caught up by the grandeur of the temple, its massive foundation stones and surrounding buildings. Josephus records that some of those stones were quite large, twenty-five cubits (38 ft.) long, eight cubits (12 ft.) high, and twelve cubits (18 ft.) wide (*Ant.* 15.392 [xi]). It is difficult for us to comprehend what an architectural wonder this sight was in the ancient world. Wessel points out in his commentary:

The temple area...had been rebuilt by Herod the Great. The courtyard had been greatly enlarged...in order to accommodate the large throngs of Jews who came to Jerusalem for the festivals. To accomplish this a huge platform had to be erected to compensate for the sharp falling off of the land to the southeast. An enormous retaining wall was built to hold the platform in place. The massive stones used in the construction of this wall may still be seen today, since part of the wall escaped the destruction of AD 70. At the southeast corner the temple platform towered two hundred feet above the Kidron Valley.

In addition to the temple building itself, on the platform stood porticoes and cloistered courts flanked by beautiful colonnades. The temple area covered approximately one-sixth of the area of the city of Jerusalem. It was an architectural wonder and its size and location dominated the ancient city.²

But, despite the magnificence of the buildings, and the massive weight of the foundation stones, their permanence was a mere illusion. Jesus predicts once again that this mountain will be "**cast into the sea**" (Mk 11:23), and in the tradition of Micah (3:12) and Jeremiah (7:14), declares that "not one stone shall be left upon the other." The metaphor (hyperbole) implies that there will be a complete and thorough destruction of the temple. This shocking statement must have stunned the disciples, provoking much discussion among them as they made the steep hike up to the Mount of Olives.³

A group of them even began to question Jesus privately about it. Verses 3-4:

And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?"

Arriving at the summit, with the glory of the city in full view, four of the disciples take Jesus aside to ask him about the timing of what he had just predicted. Their question is quite straightforward. It is important to view it in the context of the book of Mark and refrain from reading other questions into it. Jesus has just announced the destruction of the temple and its surrounding buildings and the disciples are curious to know when "*these things*" will take place. When will the things that Jesus has just predicted occur, and what will be the signs leading up to them? Richard France⁴ has done an excellent job of pointing out the precise grammatical indicators which, when linked together, give a clear chronological sequence to the text.

The disciples open with the question, "*when will these things be?*" and Jesus concludes with, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until *all these things* take place" (13:30). Jesus stakes his credibility on the fact that everything he says between verses 5-30 will happen within the disciples' generation. They will see it while they are yet alive, but it will not be soon. Therefore they are not to be misled, for many things must yet take place before it happens, and they have much work to do in advance of that day. With supreme pastoral care Jesus leads the disciples through the next forty years so they will not be surprised with regard to what to expect or what to do in the midst of the stress. The metaphor that holds "*all these things*" together is the well known Hebrew image of the *labor pains of childbirth* (Isa 13:8; 26:17; Jer 4:31; 6:24; Mic 4:9-10). "By this time it was almost a special term for 'the birth pangs of the Messiah,' the period of distress preceding the Messianic Age."⁵

II. Beginning Labor Pains (13:5-13)

A. False Messiahs (13:5-6)

And Jesus began to say to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He!' and will mislead many.

Jesus begins by issuing a warning to the disciples to not be deceived. The coming decades will be dominated by power-hungry terrorist groups who would put forth many Messianic pretenders promising liberation from Rome. Josephus in his writings records some of these pretenders. They include John of Gischala, from Galilee, the leader of the Zealots; Simon ben Giora, the most serious contender for King of the Jews, whose movement lasted nearly two years; Judas the Egyptian who claimed to restore Israel; and Menahem, descendent of Judas the Galilean, who emerged from a group of professionally trained dagger-carrying assassins called the Sicarii.⁶ The Sicarii would mix in among large festival crowds and murder their victims with curved daggers concealed under their garments, and then slip away undetected. It was this last cadre of rebels that banded together and stormed the fortress of Masada, putting to death the Roman garrison. Jesus says that many will be misled by these pretenders to the Messianic throne, but their appearance should come as no surprise to the disciples.

The second sign of the beginning of birth pangs will be "earth shaking" events both in the political and natural realm.

B. "Earth Shaking" Events (13:7-8)

"And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be frightened; those things must take place; but that is not yet the end. For nation will arise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will also be famines. These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.

Jesus tells the disciples that the coming decades will be dominated by fear, constant uprisings and violence, when wars and rumors of wars will dominate the "headlines." Josephus wrote: "[The brigand-like elements]...urged many to revolt, spurring them on toward freedom and threatening with death those who submitted to Roman rule ... Splitting up into armed groups, they ranged over the countryside, killing the powerful rich, plundering their houses, and setting fire to the villages."⁷

These revolutionary movements, coupled with the upsurge of guerrilla activity, kept everyone, especially the ruling classes, in a state of fear. "Men watched their enemies from a distance, and not even approaching friends were trusted."⁸ Together with these political upheavals, Jesus also predicts natural disasters like earthquakes and famine. In the late 40's AD there was a prolonged drought and severe famine. The resulting deteriorating economic situation left poor townships prey to brigand bands of looters.

Such unstable conditions would give rise to tremendous fear, but Jesus tells his disciples they need not fear political upheaval or natural disasters. According to Jesus, these things are just the beginning, not the end. Notice that Jesus is giving precise information so as to alleviate fear. "Do not fear!" he says. These "earth shaking" events are not to shake the faith of the disciples. Rather, like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt, they will be instruments to give birth to the kingdom of God upon earth. What a contrast this is with the teaching of most modern prophesy gurus, who exploit these images to create fear and panic concerning the end!

Now that Jesus has painted a clear picture as to the conditions the disciples will experience following his death and resurrection, he goes on to describe what their exact role will be during that period, and explicitly, the reception they can expect to receive from the world. As we might imagine, it will be the same reaction their master received.

C. Closed Hearts and Open Doors (13:9-13)

1. Official Persecution that Creates Royal Witness

"But be on your guard; for they will deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. And when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit."

Jesus now warns his disciples that the betrayal, trial and persecution he is about to endure will be repeated for them. His way will be their way. Jesus was not spared betrayal, arrest and flogging by the Jewish and Roman authorities, and neither would they. What they were to apprehend by faith was that political persecution and severe suffering would actually become the doorway to worldwide evangelism. Jesus did not seek his own acquittal. Rather, he saw that the sovereign hand of God placed him in the hands of the authorities to give testimony to kings and accomplish redemption for the world. A few short days after Pentecost, Peter and John found themselves in Jesus' shoes, doing exactly as he did (Acts 3-4). The apostle Paul viewed his own trials in the same light. He gave glory to God for each of his imprisonments, knowing these were but holy instruments to bear witness to kings and all who were in authority (Acts 9:15; 1 Tim 2:1-2), as well as encourage free Christians to give bold testimony to Jesus (Phil 1:12-14). Jesus says it would go on that way until these apostles had preached the gospel to the whole known world. And indeed this was the apostolic claim by AD 70 (Mic 3-4; Isa 66:19-20; Rom 15:19; Col 1:6; 1 Tim 3:16).

So Jesus states that the tool for worldwide evangelism, strangely enough, is persecution. He continues with even more paradoxical sayings, declaring that these terrible times of persecution will be the sweetest of times for the souls of the disciples. Their darkest nights will explode into the most glorious dawn, for in that hour the same Holy Spirit who spoke through Jesus at his trial will boldly speak through them before their accusers. Once more he tells them they need not fear the day, or even prepare what they will say. The Spirit will strengthen them and speak through them with the courage of a prophet. Their greatest trial will turn out to be their finest hour. Viewed in this light it is little wonder that the most moving and courageous sermons in Acts were those uttered spontaneously while these men were on trial for their very lives: Peter before the Sanhedrin, Stephen before the elders, Paul before Felix and Agrippa. During this entire period, therefore, the disciples could expect official persecution to be the tool to open doors to worldwide witness.

But that was not all. Times would become even more intense.

2. Universal Betrayal Breeds Steadfast Loyalty

“And brother will deliver brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved.”

Jesus moves from the official, political sphere to the more intimate scenes of home and social community. What can the disciples expect in those arenas? Jesus quotes Micah 7:6, which refers to a total social breakdown in which the most intimate bonds of society are severed, with “brother betraying brother,” and, most painfully, parents and children, rather than nurturing each other, at inconceivable odds, one betraying the other to death, because the gospel provokes such hatred. If these two images were not bad enough, Jesus goes so far as to say that there will be no safe refuge on earth where the apostles will be free from ridicule for the name of Christ. What is he saying but that it is betrayal that governs the world? (2 Cor 11:24-28).

But again, lest the disciples be overcome with dread, Jesus hints that these deplorable conditions of betrayal will have a twofold effect. Betrayal will weed out the unfaithful who infiltrate the ranks of the holy, and will simultaneously forge the strongest bonds of loyalty among the faithful, who will endure until the end. The result will be a steadfast endurance and a loyal-love that stares death in the face. This is what will flood the hearts of these disciples. The love of Christ will so grip their souls (2 Cor 5:14) that they will persevere, absolutely unaffected by what men think. So universal betrayal by men will birth an enduring loyalty to Christ. The account of Stephen's bold yet loving face toward his accusers at his death has always filled me with awe (Acts 7:60).

What a gift Jesus gives to his disciples! He reveals to them the exact conditions they will endure during this entire period, their identity in the midst of it, what their role will be, and the ultimate outcome. In short, he has placed them center-stage on the new horizon of history. It is they, not the current leadership in Jerusalem, who will be the movers and shakers of the new universe. Jesus could hardly have painted the future for the disciples with a broader brush.

For them, these “labor pains” will be the standard operating procedure right up until the time they see what Daniel called “the abomination that makes desolate.” When they see this they are to flee Jerusalem, because a severe tribulation is about to fall on upon the city, immediately followed by the vindication of the Son of Man. We will look at these events next week.

What then are the implications of this text for us today?

III. The Implications of Apostolic Labor

A. A Holy Respect for the Twelve and their Gospel

Reflecting on these verses I feel a deep sense of humility when I contemplate the unique role given by Jesus to the apostles. As the text opened they were overcome with the beauty and permanence of Israel's temple, but then Jesus astounded them by saying that it would be utterly destroyed and a new one built in its place. That birthing process would throw the whole known world into a “severe labor” of turmoil and disaster of every kind. But, just as the ten plagues of Egypt shook all of Pharaoh's world to give birth to Israel, so these worldwide labors would shake every kingdom, especially Jerusalem, to give birth to the church. By the end of that generation, twelve beautiful foundation stones, flawless and perfectly cut, would be permanently laid for the new “living temple.” So the disciples who once were in awe of Herod's temple will find themselves at the center of the new temple.

Notice the meticulous care that goes into laying these precious foundation stones. The apostles' way of life will follow that of Jesus in every detail—arrest, betrayal, death, and resurrection. Thus, once this foundation is laid there will be no question as to the purity of their gospel, nor will there ever be need to lay another foundation. So Paul will write to the Galatians, “But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:8).

We ought to be overcome with humility and awe when

we recall that the scriptures we possess were purchased with the blood of Christ and sealed by the blood of the apostles. The blood of Christ purchased our redemption; the blood of the apostles produced the New Testament. What a sharp contrast with the cults, whose founders have questionable backgrounds and who often gain material profit from their claims. This ought to engender in us great appreciation for the apostles, and put us on our guard against those who would seek to usurp their place. Let us treasure and obey what they preached, remembering that Paul wrote to Timothy, "Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you" (2 Tim 1:14).

B. Realistic Expectations for our Future

Secondly, this text ought to shape our expectations about the future. It seems to me the apostles saw that what God uniquely did with Israel during their generation (30-70 AD) became a microcosm for the larger history of the gospel among the nations. Thus Paul tells Timothy, who was an elder in the church in Ephesus, what he could expect in the "last days" (the period between Pentecost and the Second Coming): "In the last days difficult times will come," said Paul. It will be an age dominated by stress, suffering and betrayal (2 Tim 3:1-13). The apostle universalizes for all believers the persecutions and sufferings that were his own lot, for, he says, "...all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12).

John also wrote that many anti-christs had arisen who, in effect, purified the church, weeding out false brethren and at the same time strengthening the loyalty of the faithful (1 Jn 2:18-19). Thus, as Christians we live with realistic expectations for our lives, refusing to be intimidated by the fears that cause panic in the world. Persecution lies ahead, yes, but in Christ we can trust that persecution will serve to strengthen the deepest bonds of loyalty and affection for Christ, for in him we shall endure to the end (2 Tim 2:19). How different this is from the rapturous hope of some who say the church will be taken away! As I read the New Testament I can find no clear text that says Christians will escape suffering, but rather that we shall be preserved through suffering. The whole thrust of the book of Revelation, which was written after 70 AD, declares that in the midst of the tremendous sufferings unleashed on the earth, "blessed is he who endures until the end." Christians can be realistic about the future. We do not need to be tossed and turned by waves of idealism that come with every four-year election period, or plagued by the despair that grips the world in the midst of wars or natural disasters. So this text which gives us a holy awe for our apostolic foundation also gives us realistic expectations about our future.

Finally, it leaves us with hope.

C. Eyes of Faith, Founded in Hope

Just as the apostles saw that their persecution would become the doorway to evangelism, so they exhorted their disciples with the same hope. Rather than thwarting the gospel, persecution and suffering advances the good news. It was Paul himself who said, "My circumstances [of imprisonment] have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (Phil 1:12). Ray Stedman humorously said of this verse: "God appointed the devil to be the head of the committee on world evangelism!" Luke carefully documented several Satanic attacks on the church, yet, after each attack, whether persecution from without or division from within, the church continued to grow (Acts 4:4, 33; 5:14; 6:7; 8:4; 9:31). Acts reads like a divine comedy, or tragedy, depending on whose side you are on. This is why Paul exhorted Timothy to pray for all men, especially those in authority (1 Tim 2:1-2). He knew that he and other Christians while enduring suffering for the gospel would give testimony before kings and rulers. The apostle wanted Christians to be prepared for this and use such opportunities to lead their captors to Christ. Christians who live this way, who have eyes of faith, will live with tremendous hope, undaunted by fear.

Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb 12:28-29)

1. I am especially grateful to Rikki Watts, of Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., for his outline of this material.
2. Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 743.
3. Watts observes: "This was the mountain upon which the Lord was expected to come (Zech 14:3f) and to fight against the nations; but who is now behaving like the nations? Jesus is offering his own stunning exegesis of Zech 14: God's own people have become like the very nations from whom Yahweh was to deliver his people."
4. Taken from his lectures on Mark at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C. See also his book, *Divine Government*.
5. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 498.
6. Taken from Rikki Watts' outline.
7. Richard A. Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs, Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (Harper and Row, 1985) 207.
8. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.256-257.

© 1999 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino