

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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Coming of the Son of Man

Mark 13:14-27

Key verse: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26).

In the time of Jesus, the temple that Herod built in Jerusalem was one of the wonders of the world. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote this description: “Now the outward face of the temple in its front wanted nothing that was likely to surprise men’s minds or their eyes, for it was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun’s own rays.”

Seen from a distance, Josephus explained, the great temple looked “like a mountain covered with snow” because those parts not plated with gold were made of huge, white marble stones.

Mark’s gospel tells us that, one day, Jesus and his disciples were leaving this majestic building when one of the disciples said to Jesus: “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” (Mark 13:1). Imagine how shocked and puzzled those disciples must have been when Jesus replied: “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2).

A short while later, four of the disciples asked Jesus, “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” (v. 4). Any interpretation of Mark 13 should bear in mind that it comes as Jesus’ response to these two questions of the disciples. What makes Mark 13 difficult to understand is that Jesus’ answer weaves together several different prophetic threads, dealing both with events surrounding the destruction of Herod’s temple and the Second Coming of Christ.

In verse 14, Jesus speaks of “the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be.” Many interpreters see this reference as having been initially fulfilled in 168 B.C., when the Greek conqueror Antiochus Epiphanes set up an altar to Zeus on the sacred altar of the Jerusalem temple. In Mark 13, Jesus also looks ahead to the Roman destruction of the temple that would occur in 70 A.D. And, some believe, “the desolating sacrilege” might also refer to an image of the Antichrist being set up

in the temple at some later time (see 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and Revelation 13:14-15).

Jesus is responding, remember, to the disciples' question about the destruction of Herod's temple. So, verses 14-23 seem to focus primarily on that event. Jesus warns that, at the time of the temple's destruction, people should be ready to "flee to the mountains" (v. 14). He prophesies that it will be a time of great suffering (v. 19).

Josephus also writes about the terrible suffering that took place in 70 A.D., when the Romans invaded Jerusalem. He says that over one million people were killed by crucifixion, the sword, or by famine. Herod's temple was literally destroyed stone by stone, just as Jesus had prophesied.

Verses 24-27 seem to focus primarily on the end times when Christ returns. These verses conclude with this great promise, "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds' with great power and glory."

So, what are we to take away from Mark 13 for our lives today? Whatever our specific interpretations of this prophetic passage, we can all agree that Jesus' words toward the end of the chapter speak to us as well as the first disciples: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father (v. 36)...Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (v. 42).

I remember listening to a well respected Bible scholar teach on this passage. When he came to verse 36 he asked rhetorically, "Do you know what those words 'no one knows' mean in the New Testament greek?" We all leaned forward, waiting for some awesome revelation. Then the scholar answered: "They mean *no one knows!*"

We do well to remember that specific time tables for Christ's return might not be the best response to Bible prophecy. Jesus himself said "no one knows" specifically when the Second Coming will take place. However, Jesus also said that his followers should live our lives in readiness for that day. "Keep watch," Jesus says (v. 42). We should live our lives as if Christ might return today—living Christ-like lives and pointing others to the hope that we have found in Him.

Wendy Zoba tells a story that might illustrate what it means to "keep watch." Her preschool-age son, Ben, had heard sermons about the importance of surrendering one's life to Jesus. Ben's parents had discussed with him what it meant to make this commitment. They were disturbed that Ben seemed stubbornly resistant to the idea. This continued for several months.

"Then, one morning," Wendy recalled, "as we sat around the kitchen table eating our Cheerios, little Ben announced that he was ready to give his life to Christ. He then got up from the table and went upstairs. My husband and I looked at each other and followed him. I guess we expected to find Ben on his knees in prayer. We

didn't. Instead, we found him folding his Star Wars pajamas into his Sesame Street suitcase.

"We said, 'Ben, what are you doing?'

"He answered, 'Packing.'

"Why?" we asked.

"To go to heaven," he said.

"We then understood why our child hesitated to give his life to Christ. He thought that in so doing, he would have to leave us and take up residence, literally, with Christ in heaven." (from *Christianity Today*, 10-2-95)

No, we do not know when Christ will return. But, like Benjamin, we should live our lives in readiness and expectation of His appearing!

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