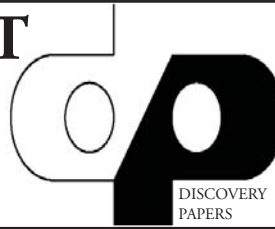


CANDLES IN THE NIGHT

***SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK***



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Mark 13:24-37
40th Message
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After I graduated from college, I moved to Ben Lomond, a town in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and rented a room in a small, rickety cottage near the top of a hill. One night, I was awakened by a series of the loudest explosion-like sounds I have ever heard. Immediately and instinctively, I leapt out of bed and fell to the floor, landing on all fours like a cat. The foundation of the cottage was shaking. Although it was the middle of the night, my room was lighting up like noonday. Was the world falling apart? My first thought, as I trembled on the floor, was, “Is this the second coming?” Well, no, it wasn’t. It was a rare—extremely rare for the Bay Area—thunder and lightning storm of immense power. I have never experienced any storm approximating it. For a moment, anyway, it put the fear of God into me.

The Scriptures teach us that the kingdom of God has come. They also teach us that the kingdom of God will come. They teach us that Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, will come to consummate his reign. In light of his future and final coming, how then should we live? Jesus, in part two of the Olivet Discourse, has some advice for us.

In part one, Mark 13:1-23, Jesus predicted both the destruction of the temple and events leading up to it so that his disciples would be able to flee Jerusalem before it was too late. In fulfillment of Jesus’ predictions, the Romans destroyed the temple in 70 A.D. It’s impossible to overestimate the significance of this event. The terrorists who attacked the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, targeted multiple buildings in part for their symbolic value. On the other hand, the Romans who laid siege to Jerusalem focused on one building: the temple. The World Trade Center meant something to the United States. The temple meant everything to Israel. It symbolized all of what Israel was. It’s no wonder, then, that Jesus uses cosmic imagery (scholars call it “apocalyptic” imagery) in the Olivet Discourse to describe the events that he predicts. Just like the prophets, Jesus uses such imagery to invest the events he speaks of with eternal significance.

Although every prophecy of Jesus in Mark 13 has been fulfilled, not every prophecy has been completely fulfilled. Other New Testament writers employ the language of the Olivet Discourse, especially from part two, and apply it to still-future events. Therefore, Mark 13:24-37 allows us to peer into the future. First, though, we must look back.

The coming of the Son of Man

Mark 13:24-27:

“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. Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory. And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven.”¹

Earlier in Mark 13, Jesus predicted that there would be tribulation within the span of “those days” (Mark 13:17, 19). Now, he predicts events that will take place after the tribulation but still within the span of “those days.” He is still preparing his disciples for events that will transpire within their lifetimes.

In predicting cosmic disturbances, Jesus employs the prophets, who used such language to predict God’s judgment against pagan nations and even against Israel (Isaiah 13:10, Ezekiel 32:7, Joel 2:10, Haggai 2:6). At least on the first level, he is not predicting a literal collapse of the heavens. He is using imagery, just like the prophets, to invest God’s coming judgment—in this case, against Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple—with spiritual significance. We employ similar language when we refer to earth-shaking events or developments that are cosmic in scope.

Earlier, Jesus warned his disciple to beware of people who proclaimed the presence of the Christ (Mark 13:21-22). Now, he speaks of celestial disturbances (God’s judgment against Israel) that will, after the tribulation, herald the coming of the Son of Man (the Christ). Jesus paints a picture of the darkened sky providing a backdrop for the glorious coming of the Son of Man. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has identified himself as the Son of Man, the representative of God’s people who, in the vision of the prophet Daniel, comes up to the Ancient of Days, God, to receive an everlasting kingdom (Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus has already told his disciples that some of them would not die until they had seen the coming of the Son of Man and the arrival of the kingdom of God with power (Mark 8:38-9:1). Later, he will tell the high priest that he, too, would “see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power” and “coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62).²

For Jesus, the coming of the Son of Man, at least on one level, is something that people of his generation would witness. In the context of Jesus' discourse, the coming of the Son of Man relates to the questions the disciples asked about the destruction of the temple (Mark 13:4). The tribulation seemingly includes the destruction of the temple, and the Son of Man would be seen as coming after the destruction of the temple but still within the span of "those days." The disciples had hoped that Jesus would be enthroned when he came to Jerusalem. Instead, he would be crucified in Jerusalem and enthroned in heaven. The coming of the Son of Man, then, relates to the exercise of Jesus' authority as the enthroned Son of Man and, more specifically, to evidence of that authority: for "they will see" the coming of the Son of Man. The emphasis in the Gospel of Mark is not on the coming of the Son of Man but on the perception of his coming. Perhaps in one sense, it can be said that the Son of Man is always coming and that certain occasions present themselves as opportune for recognizing him. After the destruction of the temple, in fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy, the evidence of his authority as the enthroned Son of Man would be there for all to see. The language that Jesus uses need not be interpreted to mean literal sight.³

The gathering of the elect, followers of Jesus, would provide further evidence of the authority of the Son of Man. Israel anticipated the regathering of dispersed Israel, and the New Testament understands this regathering to be fulfilled in the coming of both Jews and Gentiles to Christ (Deuteronomy 30:4, Isaiah 49:12, Matthew 8:11). The new king (the Son of Man) gathers the worldwide people of God (Jews and Gentiles who submit to him) not to the temple but to himself. Angels, heavenly messengers, would have a hand in spreading the gospel (Acts 8:26, 10:22, 12:7, 27:23). The rise of the church of Jesus Christ in the first century, against the overwhelming opposition of both the Jewish and Roman establishments, would provide eye-opening evidence that Jesus had triumphed over his enemies and was reigning over all the earth as the Son of Man.

Evidence of his reign in the resurrection

On the first level, Jesus spoke to his disciples about events that were about to transpire. He therefore speaks to us, on the first level, about events that have already transpired, about what took place in the first century. It is impossible to overstate the significance of these events. Cosmic language is as close as the biblical writers can get to capturing their import. The Son of Man has risen from the dead, he has ascended to the Ancient of Days, the temple has been destroyed, and a new temple comprising the worldwide people of God has risen in its place. The kingdom of God has come with power, and the universe will never be the same.

Jesus told his disciples that evidence of his authority as the enthroned Son of Man would be there for all to see. It is there for us to see. Where do you look for it? First, you look for it in the tomb that Jesus was placed in. If he vacated it, if he rose from the dead in bodily form, then his words will not pass away, and they are true: he reigns over creation. If he didn't vacate the tomb, then his words cannot be trusted, and the New Testament is a lie. The apostle Paul says as much (1 Corinthians 15:12-19).

The central apologetic for biblical faith is the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The faith of the earliest followers of Jesus and the astounding rise of the church in the first century provide strong evidence for the resurrection. The earliest followers of Jesus claimed that he rose from the dead and convinced thousands that he rose from the dead.

First, what motivation would his earliest followers have had for risking their lives, in the face of intense opposition, to invent a story that he rose from the dead? Many of them were martyred for their faith. People will die for what they believe to be true. The vast majority of people will not die for what they know to be false.

Second, how were Jesus' earliest followers able to convince thousands that he rose from the dead if in fact he did not rise from the dead? Would-be messiahs were crucified by Rome with some regularity. When they were, their following dissipated. Not so with Jesus of Nazareth. His following increased, and increased, and is increasing to this day. The most reasonable explanation for the astounding growth of the church in the first century is that Jesus did what he said he was going to do: he rose from the dead, ascended to God, and gathered his elect from the four winds. Many people claimed to be eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus. If their report was untrue, it would have been easy to disprove. Just go to the tomb. Or produce the body. To believe that the church was founded and grew based on a fabrication that would have been easy to disprove requires a lengthy leap of faith.

Now, some would argue that the stories of the resurrection circulated long after the death of Jesus. Even if that were true, why would such stories be invented, and why did people believe them, and why did people die for them? People stayed dead in the first century just as they stay dead today. If you're going to invent a story that you want people to believe, why not make it believable?

The evidence strongly suggests that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. If he rose from the dead, he reigns over creation.

Evidence of his reign in his people

First, you look for evidence of Jesus' authority as the enthroned Son of Man in the tomb that he was placed in.

Second, you look for evidence in the lives of his people. In the first case, you consider history. In the second case, you consider the present.

Most assuredly, and sadly, many who name the name of Christ show little evidence that he makes any difference in their lives. To be sure, the church in the United States has an image problem, partly deserved and partly created by selective media coverage, especially of the culture wars. Many followers of Jesus, therefore, take pains to distance themselves from the culture warriors—hence, the recently released documentary, *Lord, Save Us from Your Followers*.

However, if you look carefully, beyond the stories that make their way into the media, you will see evidence of the risen Christ both in the lives individuals who submit to his reign and in the believing communities that are bringing his healing, loving rule to the world. If Christ is real, then he changes lives. If he changes lives, then he's real. The strongest evidence for the reign of Christ may be his power to influence believing individuals and communities who submit to his reign. Dwight Moody said, "Of one hundred men, one will read the Bible; the ninety-nine will read the Christian."⁴

Recently, we opened up our worship services for congregational sharing. It impressed me, upon hearing our people open their hearts to each other, that Christ is reigning in our church and in our people. When Nathanael heard that Jesus hailed from Nazareth, he said, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip told him, "Come and see" (John 1:46). Some today say, "Can any good thing come out of the church?" I say, "Come and see." Come and see Jan Richmond, who's been wounded by rejection but is learning that rejection is protection. Come and see George MacFarland, who battles lung cancer with grace and beauty. Come and see a community that upholds them with love and prayer. Come and see a community that wants to do the same for you. Come and see a community that is striving, though we struggle and fail, to bring healing love to the world. Come and see, though we scratch and claw, that Jesus is alive and well, reigning on high and in the hearts of his people. To those who want to be saved from Jesus' followers, I say, come and see.

Jesus calls his followers "the light of the world": the light for a world that dwells in darkness (Matthew 5:14). We carry candles in the night, illuminating the reign of Christ.

At our church, we have recently begun taking a new approach to our small group ministry that includes an invitational component. We want to establish small, vibrant communities, within our larger church community, that pulsate with the life of Christ and invite seekers and skeptics to join them so that others, too, may experience the reign of Christ as he expresses it in his people.

Jesus, having employed apocalyptic language in verses 24-27 to speak about his coming as the Son of Man, turns to parabolic language in verses 28-37 to inspire spiritual alertness in light of his coming.

The fig tree and the journey

Mark 13:28-37:

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

"Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come. 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, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!'"

Like the branches and leaves of a fig tree that signal the coming of summer, the events that Jesus has predicted ("these things") will signal for his disciples that he, or it, is near. (The word translated "He" in verse 29 can also be translated "it.") Luke understands Jesus to be talking not about the nearness of a person per se but the nearness of the kingdom of God (Luke 21:31). At the outset of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus said that the kingdom of God was near (Mark 1:15). When Jesus says that he or it will be near, perhaps we would best understand him to be referring to the combination of culminating events—the destruction of the temple, his coming as the Son of Man with power and glory—that represent the coming of God's rule. Jesus wants his disciples to take notice of preliminary events (these things) so that they will be prepared to flee Jerusalem before he/it comes—before it's too late.

Jesus tells his disciples that "all these things"—the preliminary events and the final events, culminating in the destruction of the temple and his coming as the Son of Man with power and glory—will take place within "this generation": the generation of Jesus and his disciples.⁵ The disciples asked Jesus about the timing of "these things"

(the things pertaining to the destruction of the temple) and for the nature of a sign indicating when “all these things” (both things pertaining to the destruction of the temple and to the destruction of the temple itself) would be fulfilled. Jesus, in response, has told them the “things” to look for so that they might be ready for the fulfillment of “all these things.”

In saying that his words will not pass away, Jesus emphasizes their reliability. Again, the disciples should listen to him, not the words of deceivers, false prophets, and false Christs.

The disciples, if they listen to Jesus, will be able to know enough in order to flee Jerusalem before the destruction of the temple. However, Jesus doesn't tell them in advance any specific date. Instead of making plans according to the calendar, they must “keep on the alert.” The impossibility of knowing “that day or hour” heightens the responsibility to be alert. Finally, Jesus uses the illustration of a man who goes on a journey in order to inspire his disciples to be faithful: to follow him, not deceivers. Jesus commands his disciples to be alert to the events he has predicted so that they might be faithful: so that they might follow him, not deceivers.

Jesus' admonition to the four disciples on the Mount of Olives to “be on the alert” applies to all—to all who would listen to him so that they might follow him in the way of the cross, not the way of the sword, and watch for when to flee Jerusalem. Eventually, in fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy, the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 70 A.D.

More to come

The Son of Man has come: he has come up to the Ancient of Days. Yet, there is more to come. Other New Testament writers employ similar language to that of Jesus when speaking of the future and final coming of the Son of Man. If Jesus on the first level could speak about the coming of the Son of Man in clouds, in connection with his ascension and the destruction of the temple, John could say on another level, after the ascension and the destruction of the temple, “Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him” (Revelation 1:7). If Jesus could speak about the gathering together of the elect from the four winds, Paul could speak of our future and final “gathering together” to Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:1). The gathering that Jesus began with the angels in the first century will not be complete until the Son of Man comes again.

The command to stay alert takes on new urgency in light of the future coming of the Son of Man. For if the first coming of the Son of Man involved judgment on unrepentant Jerusalem, the final coming will involve judgment

on the unrepentant world. What happened to Jerusalem when Rome laid waste to it in 70 A.D. foreshadows, in a small way, what will happen to the whole world at some future unknown date, for the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ, will judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42, 2 Timothy 4:1, 1 Peter 4:5).

Brian Morgan, a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, comments, “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.”⁶

Such a fate, or something like that, awaits those who refuse to submit to the loving rule of the Son of Man. On the other hand, those who submit to him, who long for his appearing, will be gathered to him and reign with him over the renewed creation forever (Revelation 22:5).

How then should we live?

In light of the future coming of the Son of Man to consummate his reign, we, like the disciples, should be alert for the purpose of being faithful. Jesus told his disciples that wars, earthquakes, and famines were the beginning of birth pangs. In the first century, God was giving birth to a new temple comprising followers of his Son. Today, God is giving birth to a new world, which, by the way, John equates with a temple (Revelation 21:22). Paul says, “For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.” Creation was subjected to futility because humans turned their backs on God. Therefore, it waits eagerly for the final coming of the Son of Man and the redemption of humanity, whereupon its labor will be complete. Likewise, we groan as we wait for our final redemption. Even the Holy Spirit is groaning. (Romans 8:18-27).

The searing pain of creation, in chorus with the pain of humanity—characterized by, among other things, wars, earthquakes, and famines—are the birth pangs of a new world. Stay alert to that pain. Stay alert to that pain for the purpose of being faithful. Each earthquake we hear about, for example, reminds us that the Son of Man is coming and that we should therefore be faithful to him, following him in the way of the cross and not following deceivers in any other way, especially the way of the sword.

Just as the disciples didn't know the day or hour in their context, we don't know the day or hour in ours. Our ignorance about the timing of the final coming of the Son of Man heightens our responsibility to stay alert for the purpose of being faithful. We're on a journey. We know there's a destination. We just don't know how close we

are. We know that we're closer than we were yesterday. Convulsions such as wars, earthquakes, and famines serve to remind us that the end could be today.

On May 19, 1780, the sky of Hartford, Conn., darkened ominously while the state House of Representatives was meeting. Some representatives feared that the end was at hand and clamored for immediate adjournment. However, Colonel Abraham Davenport, the Speaker of the House, rose and said, "The day of judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty." The meeting resumed.⁷ As followers of Jesus, our duty is to remain faithful to him and his ways.

Be a sign

The Son of Man, enthroned in heaven, reigns over earth. One day, he will come to consummate his reign. No one knows when that day will be. Perhaps, though, my middle-of-the-night wakeup call in the Santa Cruz Mountains was a sign of sorts, at least for me. Perhaps the dark sky over the Hartford, Conn., in 1780 was some kind of sign also, even though two centuries have since passed and the Son of Man still hasn't consummated his reign. You don't need to pore over the news to read the signs. The signs are all around us, in the groans of a world in the throes of labor. In the groans, we hear the hope for a new world.

To be sure, a new day is coming, a day so glorious, so charged with the presence of God, that there will be no need for sun or moon (Revelation 21:23). Perhaps, then, what Jesus says will literally come true: "the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light." On the final day, will he literally come with the clouds? Perhaps. In any event, until that day, his followers carry candles in the night, illuminating his reign. For a sign both that Christ reigns and that he is coming to consummate his reign, look at his followers. And while you're at it, believe in Jesus and be a sign yourself. Perhaps, then, instead of looking for signs, we should be signs. Yes, don't look for a sign; be a sign. Stay alert: be faithful to Christ and his ways. Carry a candle in the night.

NOTES

1 Literary structure:

A "Then they will see the Son of Man coming ..." (24-27).

B What you should "know": when he/it is near (28-29).

X What won't/will "pass away"; veracity of Jesus' words (30-31).

B' What you can't "know": day, hour, appointed time (32-33).

A' "Be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming" (34-37).

² Likewise, Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew, tells his disciples that the Son of Man would come before they had completed their mission to Israel (Matthew 10:23). Furthermore, Stephen reported, not long after the resurrection of Christ, that he saw the Son of Man at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56).

³ The coming of the Son of Man in judgment "in clouds with great power and glory" echoes Isaiah's prediction that the Lord would come in judgment against Egypt, "riding on a swift cloud" (Isaiah 19:1). Isaiah was not saying that God would literally go for a ride on a cloud or that people would be able to see him.

⁴ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1997), 262.

⁵ Some interpreters take "this generation" to mean something other than the generation of Jesus and his disciples. I was part of a choir in the 1970s that performed a song based on the interpretation that "this generation" commenced with the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948, that a generation constituted forty years, and that the end times would therefore be ushered in by 1988. The lyric "this generation" in the song meant that the end times would commence within a few years. Some of us questioned whether the end times were really upon us, so we joked that we should change the lyric to "one of these generations." The context of the Olivet Discourse, including Matthew's usage of the phrase "this generation" immediately preceding his version, suggests that the words should be taken as referring to the generation of the disciples, not some future generation (Matthew 23:34-36).

⁶ Brian Morgan, "The End of Labor" (Cupertino, Calif.: Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, Catalogue No. 1138, Dec. 5, 1999).

⁷ Timothy Dwight, *Connecticut Historical Collections*, Second Edition, compiled by John Warner Barber (1836), 403.