

MARK 13:1-11

WHEN WILL THE TEMPLE FALL?

Today we come to this intriguing and fascinating chapter of Mark's Gospel – a chapter which, along with its parallel in Matthew 25 – has prompted much debate, sometimes heated debate, over the years. And that's because it's a chapter of prophecy, and prophecy is always difficult to interpret. And we could literally spend hours – we could run a day-long seminar – discussing the various interpretations of each element of this prophecy by Jesus.

But we aren't going to do that, because the primary purpose of Jesus in saying these things wasn't eschatological (meaning providing us a detailed roadmap of the future) – it was pastoral. Jesus was warning his disciples that things were about to get worse, not better.

And it was a really important message for them to hear, because they had grown up in a religious culture which had taught them, ***“When the Messiah comes, everything is going to be better. The Messiah will usher in a golden age of renewal and restoration for the great nation of Israel.”***

And by this point in Jesus' ministry, the disciples were now pretty convinced that Jesus was that Messiah. And there was growing excitement among them about all that was about to happen.

And it's in this context, the context of this huge expectation and religious optimism, that Jesus pops their balloon and effectively says, ***“You're right. I am the Messiah. But now that I'm here, things are going to get much worse, not better. And they will get progressively and horribly worse until the very end.”***

It's a pretty dismal chapter of prophecy, but Jesus says these things out of love, out of deep concern for his followers, because he wants them not to have any false expectations, he wants them to be prepared for the hard times that are soon to come. And he wants us to be prepared too, that's why it's in our Bibles.

So, it's with that pastoral lens that I want to now spend a few moments looking at some of the things Jesus said. And as I do, it's important that we understand a key aspect of prophecy – that prophecy often has multiple fulfilments. The prophecies of the Bible often have a near fulfilment and a second, much later fulfilment. And that is certainly the case with some of the things in this chapter. Some of the things Jesus said in this discourse had an initial fulfilment in subsequent events in the first century, but also have a further fulfilment in events that are ongoing and even some that are still in our future.

So, let's jump in.

The chapter starts off with Jesus and the disciples having arrived at Jerusalem and they are sitting on the Mount of Olives, gazing across the valley at the Temple on the opposite hill. And it prompts one of the disciples to say, in verse 2,

“Look, Rabbi! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

He was certainly right. The Temple at the time of Jesus was one of the most magnificent structures in the ancient world. The Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that the temple was covered on the outside with gold plates that were so brilliant that when the sun shone it was blinding. And where there wasn't gold, there were blocks of marble of such a pure white that from the distances, visitors thought there was snow on the temple.

And the reference to massive stones is also accurate. Today, tourists can see some of these massive stones in the retaining wall for the temple compound. They are cut, quarried blocks of limestone 18 metres wide, 8 metres high and 5 metres deep – and they are so big that most modern cranes could not lift them.

It was a hugely impressive building, and the Jews were incredibly proud of it.

But listen to the reply that Jesus gives:

“Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

And they were thrown down! About 40 years later, that's exactly what happened. The Jews rose up in rebellion against their Roman oppressors and, in response, in AD 70, the Roman army swept through Gallilee and Judea destroying their towns and villages. When they reach Jerusalem, they completely destroyed the city.

Historical documents tell us that most citizens fled the city, but some took refuge in the temple. So, the Romans set fire to the temple doors and soon the fire engulfed the timber framework of the whole building. The fire became so fierce that the ornate goldwork in the roof and walls melted and ran down in the cracks between the stone blocks. So, when the fire finally died down, the Roman commander ordered that the temple be dismantled stone by stone, to retrieve all the melted gold. And so, the prophecy of Jesus came to pass. Not one stone was left on top of another.

Now, as interesting as all that is historically, there is an important metaphor here.

The temple represented the Old Covenant, with its sacrificial system that was now, as Jesus spoke these words, about to be rendered obsolete. The temple was the centre of sacrifice for sins. Every single day of the year, animals were put to death and their blood spilled to seek forgiveness for the sins of the people.

The temple represented centuries of bloodshed in an attempt to appease God for the people's sins. And of course, we now know that it never actually worked. It was never intended to work. The blood of animals can't forgive our sin! The whole sacrificial system was put in place simply to draw our attention to the seriousness of sin, and our need for forgiveness. To draw our attention to the impassable gulf that separated us from God, and our inability to approach him without the most extreme measures.

In short, the Temple was meant to prepare mankind for the coming of the Messiah, and now that he was here, its time was over.

In Hebrews chapter 10:1-4 we read:

“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason, it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ... But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

Then a few verses later we read of the one true sacrifice for sin made for us by Jesus (Heb 10:10-12):

“We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Jesus had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.”

The age of the Temple is over! The forgiveness of the Saviour is here! Made possible by his one true sacrifice for our sins.

The great tragedy of all this is that for the next forty years after Jesus made this prophecy, for forty years after he made the one true sacrifice on the cross, the Jews continued to offer their own sacrifices at the temple. They rejected the sacrifice of Jesus the Saviour and continued to offer the blood of bulls and goats. They trusted in their own efforts to be acceptable to God, instead of trusting in the Saviour.

And that is precisely what many people do today. They trust in their own efforts. They think, *“I will live such a good religious life, that God must surely let me into heaven.”*

But people like that are in for a big shock. Just as God used the Romans to ultimately tear down that temple – so fed up was He at them missing the point – God will also demolish the false pretences of people who think they can sidestep the Saviour and earn their own way into heaven.

Jesus said, **“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; NO ONE comes to the Father except by me.” (Jn 14:6)**

What are you trusting in? Your own self-righteousness? If you are, stop right now, and turn to the Saviour. Because God will demolish that self-righteousness on the Day of Judgment, and you will be left with nothing; not one stone of righteousness will be left standing. Turn to the Saviour and trust solely in him.

SUFFERING

There's a lot more in this passage that I'll only briefly mention. Because Jesus goes on to speak of the suffering that his disciples will have to endure in the coming years. In fact, he speaks of two kinds of suffering: Global suffering and Personal suffering.

Globally, verses 5 to 8 speak of a world where things will go from bad to worse. In particular, Jesus warns of three global developments:

- There will be a growing number of false Messiahs. **(v.6)**
- There will be increasing world unrest, with wars and rumours of wars **(vv. 7-8)**
- There will be a spiralling degradation of the physical world – more and more natural disasters such as earthquakes and famines. **(v.8)**

Verses 9 and following, then speak of the very **personal suffering** that Jesus' followers would soon face:

- Persecution of Christians by authorities – including imprisonment, torture and death
- Christians persecuted and estranged by their own families

IMMEDIATE AND ONGOING FULFILMENT

And in all of these prophecies, we need to recognise both their immediate and ongoing fulfilment. All of these things certainly came true in the lives of the first century disciples. The final Roman invasion of Israel in AD 70 decimated them as a nation. And the persecution of Christians under the Emperor Nero was horrific, resulting in thousands of Christians being tortured and put to death.

But these prophecies are continuing to unfold for us today.

- The natural world is spiralling into increasingly serious and frequent natural disasters.
- Human society is spiralling downward as well. We are witnessing the erosion of moral standards, the rise of terrorism, the increasing aggression and hostility of nation against nation, and very alarmingly, a world-wide escalation in the marginalisation and persecution of Christians.

What are we to make of all this?

The words of Jesus in Mark 10 are as much for us as they were for the first century disciples, and as things get worse, we must be very clear about what Jesus is saying. For us and for them, Jesus has two very simple messages:

1. Don't be surprised. Things are going to get worse, not better, before the Saviour returns at the end of history. So when you see things getting worse, don't think that you must have got it wrong – that Jesus isn't the Messiah that we thought he was. Jesus is effectively saying here, ***"I am the Saviour, but I didn't come to rejuvenate this current world – because it's destined for destruction."*** Jesus said to Pilate, ***"My Kingdom is not of this world."*** And he says the same to us. Be patient. Don't be discouraged. Don't be surprised.

2. I will be with you. Listen to his words of assurance in verse 11:

"Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit."

I wish I could promise you that we will never be arrested and persecuted for our faith, but I can't.

In his book ***"Today's Martyrs"***, David Barrett says that in the year 2000, 165,000 Christians were martyred for their faith worldwide. The Open Doors organisation lists 23 countries today where Christians are being arrested and murdered for their faith. Other researchers estimate that 43 million Christians have been martyred since the time of Jesus.

Jesus certainly doesn't promise that we won't be persecuted. But he does promise to be with us, and to strengthen us by his indwelling Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

So, how do I sum up this passage. It's not a particularly happy passage, is it? In one sense, it's dire, dark and gloomy! Things are going to get worse. Things are going to get harder, as the end approaches.

But in another sense, these words of Jesus are also very comforting. Because they tell us three important things:

1. God is in control. None of this has or will take him by surprise. He is still on the throne and history is playing out as he said it would.

2. God promises to be with us and strengthen us through it all. He will not abandon us. He will bring us safely to his eternal kingdom if we continue to trust in him.

3. The destruction of the temple ought to remind us that it is Jesus alone who can save. And it ought to cause us to leave behind all our vain and useless efforts to procure our own salvation and simply to throw ourselves on the mercy of Jesus our Saviour.

And that is my prayer for you, that you would come to trust in his saving grace in your own life, and rest in his comfort and strength through all your days in this troubled world.

AMEN.

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