

feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)



May 12, 2009

Dear Church Family,

Mark 13 is by far the longest teaching by Jesus in the gospel. Although it is often considered to be a teaching about the end times prior to the second coming of Christ, a close reading reveals that much of the material applies to a period of time in the first century. Verse 14, Mark's interjection of the phrase "let the reader understand," reveals that he considers the teaching particularly appropriate for the initial readers of his gospel. Since the teaching has more to do with being faithful disciples than providing insight into the end times, we can learn principles to apply to our own discipleship.

This long teaching is a response to a question from four disciples prompted by Jesus' statement that the Temple would be utterly destroyed, which occurred in 70 AD. From what we have read in chapters 11 and 12, we understand such an event to be a drastic judgment on Temple Judaism and its leaders. As with the previous destruction of the Temple in Israel's history, this would come at the hands of a conquering army. Therefore the entire region of Judea would be in harm's way. What would you want to know if you heard a prophecy about the Capitol Building being destroyed by a conquering army? You would want to know when it was going to happen so that you could get out of harm's way. That is exactly why the disciples want to know when these things will happen. The desire for a sign is to know when people should flee for their safety. They may also be associating the destruction of the Temple with "the end," the coming of the Kingdom of God that would mark a dramatic change in the history of the world.

Jesus' answer begins with "Watch." This word is repeated in verses 9, 23 and 33 and is the main theme of the teaching. This is a word for "seeing" and so we have again an emphasis on seeing well or clearly as a necessary aspect of discipleship. First, they are to watch out for those who would deceive them. Deceive them how? The disciples ask for a sign when things "are all about to be fulfilled" or brought to an end. Jesus answers with signs that are not about the end. Wars, rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, earthquakes and famines are not signs of the end for "the end is still to come" (v. 7). *These are the beginnings of birth pains* (v. 8), which as any mother will tell you, does not mean that the end is coming soon. This phrase puts an emphasis on increased suffering before the end. That increased suffering is described in verses 9-13 and is in the form of persecution. Jesus is telling his disciples that many will experience the same treatment as we see happens to Him....betrayed, handed over, appearing before a king and governor, flogged, and put to death. This is the explanation of Jesus' telling John and James, "you will drink the cup that I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with (10:39)." All this will come on ac-

count of allegiance to Jesus and the preaching of the gospel. Jesus paints a very bleak picture as the gospel of the kingdom brings conflict with religious authorities, civil authorities and even within one's own family. There is no place of security and safety if even family will turn against you.

But he who stands firm to the end will be saved. Here the end may well be the end of your life. How would one be able to stand firm, to endure? Only by really grasping Jesus' words in 8:34-35 about following Him and the need to be prepared to lose one's life for the gospel, not save it. Primary concern for your own welfare is a stumbling block. The path of discipleship is through suffering, not around it or away from it. So, a deception to be on guard against would be the false prophecy that the end of suffering was near when it was not. Anticipating the end of difficult times as an imminent reality does not serve you well if those times of suffering continue and require endurance. You also need to watch yourself (v.9) because your natural reaction is to preserve your life and avoid suffering.

In 9:13-23 Jesus finally gets around to answering the question for a sign, "*the abomination of desolation standing where it does not belong.*" This sign means that people in Judea should flee to the mountains. Limiting the call to flee to those in Judea shows that this sign preceded the destruction of the Temple, not the end of the world as we know it. Until this sign, disciples are to remain in Judea and endure the suffering of persecution but when this sign appears, they are to flee for their lives. Notice that this is not a very helpful sign if you want to be able to make preparation for such a flight. You have no time to even go through your house if you are on the roof. The sign does not provide the advantage the disciples may have been hoping for. The danger of being deceived by false Christs and prophets appears again. These would be prophesying that God was going to miraculously intervene and deliver the Temple from the Roman army. They would even be able to perform signs and miracles to authenticate their prophecy. This would be very convincing if you were longing for deliverance. Disciples would need to remember Jesus' words to avoid being led astray.

There is disagreement amongst respected scholars with regard to 9:24-37 and which sections are about the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and which are about the second coming of Christ. If you are curious about these issues, contact me, as I did not really address them. I did note a shift in Jesus' teaching in 32-37 when he talks about that "day or hour." I understand this to apply to His second coming. With the destruction of the Temple, there would be a sign to indicate when it was near, but with the second coming there is no such sign. That is why there is the call to "Be on guard. Be alert" at all times. The parable of the watchman reinforces this need to always be alert. Jesus focuses this teaching on the servant who has the night watch, which is the more difficult because everyone else is sleeping. I observed that this servant would not be able to live like the rest of the servants during the day and still be able to remain alert at night. He would be out of sync with the household. We are like that servant and cannot expect to live the life of the rest of society and still keep watch for Jesus to return.

There is more to be explored about the call to keep watch as we look at the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane next week. As to enduring suffering, the first half of the chapter is a good prayer guide for the persecuted church, providing ways to pray beyond praying for their protection and deliverance. We also need to watch ourselves that we do not shrink back from situations where we may face persecution if we preach the gospel and witness to truth. Our culture is becoming increasingly hostile to Christianity and we are finding ourselves more and more in an uncomfortable position when opportunities arise for us to express what we believe. We need to commit to allegiance to Jesus and rely on the Holy Spirit to speak through us in the court of public opinion.

May the spirit of the crucified Christ minister to all those who are enduring suffering,
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Announcements

The office is closed on Mondays. Messages will be picked up at noon and at 4pm and normal operations resume Tuesdays through Fridays.

The next Evening of Healing Prayer is Tuesday, May 26. Call for an appointment by Friday May 22. This is open to all at COSC attending homegroups.

MEN:

May 16—Come to COSC for a 9:00am **Men's Ministry breakfast** with GraceDC, WCF, COR, & Church of the Advent.

June 13—Men's Golf Morning.

WOMEN:

Come to A Tuscan Evening this Saturday at Vicky Goode's house from 6-8pm. Romans 8:28 *"All things work together for good"*

Sign up on Sunday morning for the women's retreat June 6-7: "Turn Down The Noise!" The retreat will be at the Bishop Claggett retreat center in Maryland.