

## **“What Will be the Sign?”**

18 November 2018: 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas

Preaching Text: Mark 13:1-8

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**“To the generous mind the heaviest debt is that of gratitude,  
when it is not in our power to repay it”**

**—Benjamin Franklin (1706 - 1790)**

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I have been proud of our congregation for the way that it has stepped up in interesting financial times to help our church continue vital ministry for 2018-9. Last Thursday evening, our DS heard a first-class report of our work at the District Church Conference we hosted. We do have some work to finish 2018, but it is doable.

Now I want you to understand that we are a fiscally conservative church. We will not set our budget on what we hope to receive, but on the pledges our congregational families make. Thus, if you plan to give 5 or 10 or 20 thousand dollars to the church next year and do not turn in a pledge card, your considerable generosity will not be reflected by the budget. Consequently, we have about two weeks to finish the work our faithful stewardship education committee has begun.

Bottom line: If you plan on giving please fill out a card. If you do not then we must slash the appropriate amount from the 2019 budget. This is not really a matter of economics; it is a matter of discipline and faith. Please help our church by taking a moment to complete your pledge card when it comes next week.

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In days past, my favorite “go-to” phrase was: “I didn’t do it!” Certainly, we all live in a culture of denial. Our denial extends even to the topics of death and decay. Perhaps one reason for this denial is that we live in a youth-oriented culture. Everything must appear youthful and vigorous. Even funeral celebrations cover up death’s truth with flowers and Astroturf that shrouds death. People often ask me to make a memorial or funeral service a celebration—which of course it is. But . . . I know that they really mean they do not want a 40-minute preaching tirade about “their” salvation. Sometimes they just want to forget their grief. But . . . we still deny death in any event.

Today, Mark’s Gospel addresses the “end times.” This theological theme seems to be of little concern to most modern people. Of course, some churches focus on the end times every Sunday. Surely, the *Left Behind* book Series targets this audience. Yet, our inclusive culture denies what these books endorse. Perhaps, it is for the reason of stress on the apocalypse that our broader culture discounts biblical omens about God finishing history. Apocalyptic literature conveys eschatology (doctrine of end times) within a certain structure. It suggests our present age is under an evil influence and God’s faithful suffer persecution. This misery increases until God intervenes on behalf of God’s people. God then inaugurates a new age of peace and joy.

If apocalyptic is the form of these prophecies, then “eschatology” describes the “end times” content. Chiefly, eschatology suggests that at some moment in the world’s history all will cease. Then, God will complete God’s work begun at creation. Yet, as Psalm 90:4 reminds us: “For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past . . . .” So, patience is a virtue we impatient human creatures need to cultivate. Thus—not denial, but rather patience!

Scholars call Mark 13 the “Little Apocalypse.” The title well describes this chapter. Apocalyptic is a literary form/genre (parable/psalm/genealogy/gospel/poetry/epistle) focusing on the doctrine of the last things. Apocalyptic includes the earth’s “end times” and comes in prophetic form. Daniel/Revelation are familiar apocalyptic writings. Other books too, contain the genre’s elements. Typically, apocalyptic writings divide humans into the God’s people and the enemies of God’s people. Thus, the second receive the divine message as a word of terror. In contrast, for the first, the message inspires hope. Hear the day’s lesson:

**[13:1] As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" [2] Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."**

**[3] When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, [4] "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" [5] Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. [6] Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. [7] When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. [8] For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs (Mark 13:1-8).**

The disciple’s statement, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” creates a backdrop for Jesus’ discourse on the temple’s destruction and its earthly consequences. While in the mouth of the disciple, the statement seems simple-minded, even so, the temple’s destruction is a chief New Testament theme (see: Matthew 26:61; Mark 14:57-58; 15:29; John 2:19; Acts 6:14). Rome destroyed the temple in 70 CE and provided Jesus’ words historic weight. Note that Jesus teaches “on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple,” implying Jesus’ temple opposition. Gethsemane, site of Jesus’ ardent prayers (Mark 14:32), is near the Mount of Olives. Jesus’ answer to “when will this be, and what will be the sign?” ties the temple’s fate to creation. Political and natural events testify to the gravity of Jesus’ final Jerusalem days.

When signs of the end begin appear, a new set of leaders emerge promising to guide people through the impending crisis. In the wake of social crisis, people often follow those promising security. Acts 5:36-37, in fact, mentions two false messiahs by name: Theudas and Judas the Galilean. Jesus teaches the first four disciples called, Peter, James, John, and Andrew (Mark 1:16-20) not to go astray. Both geo-political and natural disasters signal earth’s upheaval. So, what does this mean for us today?

I suggest that the end of something gives meaning to all that comes before it. For example, in any specified goal or pursuit, it is the end which determines all that comes before it. When people begin casual dating, it is a completely different past-time, then when daters look for a lifelong marriage

partner. Similarly, semester exams for graduate students take a more earnest tone or tenor, than do pop quizzes for high school students. The end, again, determines all that comes before it.

In today's lesson, Jesus speaks about the temple's end, and what the disciples can expect at the end of the age. For the twelve, as for us, it is the goal that determines attitudes preceding the attainment of the goal.

**How does Jesus' interpretation of the "things to come" help us take our discipleship more seriously?**

**How does the end of earthly life prepare us for the coming of God's kingdom in Christ?**

**How does this awareness make us better people?**

These questions simply remind the faithful that despite all appearances that the God we worship will stand by us to the very end—and beyond. Perhaps the word rescue is noteworthy here. Paul wrote to the church at Rome this rhetorical question: "Who will rescue me from this body of death" (Romans 7:24)? Jesus answers this question with his life/death/resurrection. It is God through Jesus that indeed rescues us.

When I was about eight years old, my friend Doug Bates and I rode our bikes down to Hidden Park on a lazy summer afternoon. When we arrived, we climbed onto a spinning merry-go-round, like the one you or your kids or grand-children like to ride in parks.

Doug and I were so busy playing and whirling around that we did not see the four older boys, probably 14 and 15, who were just looking for a little fun—at our expense. They stationed themselves around the merry-go-round and just kept pushing us faster and faster. They didn't think about stopping. All seemed lost. They were much bigger than we were and we couldn't have stopped them if we had tried.

Suddenly, the bullies halted. They saw Doug's cousin, Hal Miller, who was the toughest guy in our high school coming toward the merry-go-round, and he looked upset. The four bullies jumped on their bikes and rode away as fast as they could—in four different directions. Hal Miller had saved us just in the nick of time.

In the life of faith there are times in which our faithfulness seems to exact a great personal cost. The doctrine of the end times assures the faithful that God will be there for us at the end, just as God was there at the beginning. What other people fear, the faithful see as the final redemption of the steadfast by God.

David N. Mosser, SUMC. Salado Texas 76571