

Mark 13

Introductory Comments

1. This portion of Mark's gospel – often called the “Apocalyptic Discourse” – accentuates Jesus' already demonstrated prescient abilities which establish beyond question his dependability as a prophet. We have already seen his three detailed Passion predictions, watched his curse of the fig tree bear out, and, most notably, watched his emphatic attention to detail during his entrance into Jerusalem, where each of his instructions to his disciples happens exactly as Jesus predicts. Mark's point in depicting these foretellings is that each episode demonstrates that Jesus is a prophet of amazing capability whose words about the future are to be believed and whose orders are to be obeyed.
2. The Apocalyptic Discourse itself is divided into three rhetorical sections. A) The tribulations preceding the coming (13:5-23), with the warnings about false leaders using the name of Christ; B) the actual coming of the Son of Man in the clouds (13:24-27); and C) the parables of the Fig Tree and the Lord of the House (13:28-37), which admonish watchfulness through the indefinite but limited time still dominated by this generation.

Question and read Mark 13 aloud

Discussion Questions

1. **How does 13:1-2 relate to 12:10?** *The repetition of “stones” and “building” in 13:1-2 signal the audience that the discussion that follows will explain how the rejected stone will become head of the corner (which was alluded to in 12:10).*
2. **Why does Mark take such pains to demonstrate Jesus' omniscience?** *Mark's primary concern is to establish the believability of those predictions whose fulfillments are **not** part of the narrative itself (namely, Jesus' resurrection and return). It could be argued that the three prediction-fulfillment episodes, including the dramatic portrayal of Peter's denials, combined with the triple Passion predictions and their fulfillment in the trial and crucifixion scenes, all serve an ancillary purpose: to verify beyond doubt to the audience the accuracy and thoroughness of Jesus' prophetic announcements, so that those prophecies unfulfilled in the Gospel (and thus directed especially toward the audience) would win acceptance and belief.*
3. **Why do you think Jesus talks so much more about the tribulations that will precede the coming of the Son of Man (13:5-23) rather than the coming itself (13:24-27)?** *One explanation is that, in order to maintain credibility, Mark had to be sure that the actual lived experience of the audience agreed with the story's formulations about the future.*
4. **How does Jesus' stated suspicion of those who perform “signs and wonders” fit so well with Mark's typology?** *Throughout the Gospel, Mark has characterized*

desires for power, authority, name, and reputation – in everyone from the disciples to the Jerusalem leaders and Herod – as accompaniments of hard-heartedness and rejection of the word. Moreover, employing “signs and wonders” to persuade others to believe is an obvious perversion of Jesus’ interactive practice in which faith is the prerequisite of miracles. Jesus shuns performing signs (8:11-12), tries to suppress his spreading fame, and never exercises control over others. The false Christs and false prophets, on the other hand, are predatory leaders whose values, like those of the disciples, stem from self-aggrandizement. Such leaders permeate the entire time prior to the coming of the Son of man, and the faithful must beware of succumbing to their wiles.

5. Mark presents Jesus’ death as both a “trigger” for the return of the Lord of the Vineyard and as an “example.” How so? *The audience is encouraged to understand the Passion not only as the death of the heir that will trigger the return of the Lord, but also as an example of how the inevitable persecutions perpetrated by this evil generation on the followers of Jesus are to be endured faithfully – or how they may fail to be endured through fear. And notice that many of the tribulations to which Jesus refers are exactly the things he will endure in the coming chapters.*

*It bears repeating that for Mark, Jesus’ death is not the innocent sacrifice demanded by a righteous and angry God to atone for the sinful state of humankind. Instead, Jesus’ suffering and death are the inescapable results of challenging the authority of the current tenants of the vineyard in order to sow the good news of God’s near Kingdom to the nations. God did not send Jesus in order that he might die, but in the foolish hope that he might change hearts. **His death is the price required to do the work of sowing in all soils so that the good earth might be awakened.** Others will also face the same suffering and death, and Jesus shows us how to go through these things well.*

6. The image of the “desolating sacrilege” is one of the most peculiar in all of scripture. It is drawn from Dan 12:11, which seemingly refers to the pagan altar constructed in the Temple by the emperor. What do you think 13:14 is referring to? *What the image of the “desolating sacrilege” precisely describes is not revealed in the narrative at all; instead, the strange allusion is followed immediately by the unique “wink” to the reader by the author: “let the reader understand.” In the midst of Jesus’ words to other characters in second degree narrative, the author/narrator of first-degree narrative interrupts to address directly the reader/audience for the only time in the entire Gospel. The reader or hearer of Mark is supposed to understand something about this reference to the “desolating sacrilege set up where it is not supposed to be” that the narrative itself does not give. In other words, the “desolating sacrilege” is an esoteric image, the proper interpretation of which depends on knowledge supplied, not by the story, but by information obtained by some external, initiated group. For modern readers, separated by centuries from awareness, full understanding becomes an impossibility. We have no idea what the “desolating sacrilege” was supposed to represent. Nevertheless, the blatant narrative signal provided for this one esoteric element confers an element of reassurance concerning the public nature of the Gospel as a whole. For most of its length, the*

Gospel of Mark intends to present an exoteric story, available and accessible to a wide audience, and not a veiled writing open only to the initiated few.

7. When Jesus tells the faithful to run to the hills (13:14b), is he encouraging a faith or a fear response? How do you know? *Faith. The ugly, frightful life described will be cut short by the coming of the Lord of the Vineyard. Fear is natural, and understandable. But as Jesus warned, "whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." He's saying, "Keep sowing the seeds of the gospel far and wide, like I have done. It will bring the wrath of the authorities of this world, but God will come to set things right." As we sow far and wide, we hasten the demise of this present evil, oppressive, existence.*

8. How would you describe Mark's picture of the return of the Son of man on the clouds? *Unlike Matthew 25:31-46, the Gospel of Mark does not portray the coming judgment on the nations. Rather the Son of man sends out the angels to bring together the elect "from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven" (13:27) in order to save them from the slaughter of the great tribulation (13:20). The coming is one of protection for those who have endured faithfully to the end (13:13). Also, while the "elect" may in some sense be elected by God (13:20), they are most clearly elected by their own behavior. Those who respond to the word with faith and willingly take up the crosses forced upon them by the current world order show themselves to be the elect, the new family of Jesus who do the will of God, the fruitful ground of the kingdom. It is NOT predestination. Their actions declare their election.*

9. Who does "this generation" in 13:30 refer to? *It is used throughout Mark and always to refer negatively to the authorities in power and those opposed to Jesus. When read in context, "this generation" does not refer to the disciples or Jesus's first followers (as some commentators suggest), but to the evil tenants who control the vineyard and destroy the faithful. Their perverse authority will not cease until all the terrible events Jesus has foretold happen and the Son of man arrives to rescue the elect.*

10. What does 13:32 suggest about the Son's relationship to the Father? *They are not one in the same. Jesus is God's son and heir, so he has special status. But he is not God. Mark has a much lower Christology than other gospels.*

**** For next session, read Mark 14:1-52*