
Isaiah in Mark

Lesson 12

“Mark 13”

Objective: To understand how Isaiah is used by Mark to proclaim the good news to his original audience and to understand how this should be understood by us today. How should the gospel message impact our lives. The historical and cultural barriers often cause us to miss, or even misinterpret the message of Mark. This then inhibits transformation into the image of Christ.

Materials: Books, Journal articles, Targums, the Syriac Peshitta and interviews.

Procedures: To outline the issues that confront us as we seek to comprehend more fully the powerful ways that the Old Testament, and in particular Isaiah challenged and transformed the world-view and the lives of first century believers. In doing this, it is hoped that we can then transform that understanding into a contextual milieu that will allow our lives to be impacted by the Gospel in the powerful, transformative way that it impacted that first audience.

As we continue this study of looking at Mark with special attention being given to Isaiah some may be still asking why are we doing this, or for what purpose are we doing this? Both very fair questions. Some have perhaps discounted what we are doing here as nothing more than an intellectual exercise, or an academic pursuit. I do hope, and pray, that this is not your impression, but just in case it is let me here assure you that this is not the purpose at all. The purpose is to understand God, how he has for so long planned and persevered, longing for relationship with his people and continually pleaded with his people to understand his nature and his call for his image-bearer to truly reflect his image. So often the perceptions that we have of God and his purposes have been so terribly skewed as to present to our mind's eye a God who who is so distorted as to be unrecognizable as the true God of the Bible. Some perceive God to be vindictive and even hateful just waiting for the moment when he can catch us in a sin in order to judge us, condemn us, and cast us aside as so much garbage. On the other end of the spectrum some see God as so kind and loving that he in no way judges, or brings any

justice into the world and we are left with injustice and chaos because God will not bring justice.

Both of these extremes, and a great many permutations in between, are false and in reality amount to idolatry as in these conceptions we have created our own god. This is a god that lives in the folds of our mind; that makes us feel comfortable, safe, and secure. One of the things that I truly appreciate about the writings of C. S. Lewis, in his *Chronicles of Narnia* series, is that he reiterates over and over again that Aslan, who represents Christ in the form of a lion, is not a tame lion, but a wild lion. So often, we have transformed the God of the Bible into the God of our imagination and created a tame, safe version of this wild, passionate, dangerous God called Yahweh. My hope is that as we have explored how the prophecies of Isaiah have impacted generations of God's people, and how the good news of Jesus Christ was proclaimed as the fulfillment of these prophecies by Mark we can perceive another side to God, an additional facet that will allow us to focus more accurately upon the true nature, and plans of God.

So often we have come to believe that if we will just be obedient to God he will bless us with safety, security, freedom from pain and suffering, and prosperity. As we look at how Mark uses the texts from Isaiah, and the other prophets, we can easily see that these concerns were far away. Instead, the concerns focus upon witnessing, as part of the mission of God through Jesus Christ as he comes to this earth to demonstrate the true nature of God and to dispel the myths and fantasies that had been perpetrated, and are still perpetrated, in his name. Mark demonstrates for us the great love and compassion that God has for Jesus, and yet even with all of that love and passion that God has for Jesus, he allows Jesus to suffer, bleed, die, live in poverty, be badly mistreated and misrepresented, out of love for us. If we are truly called to be followers of Jesus Christ we should expect nothing better, and yet we do. Mark understood that Jesus came in order to turn our perceptions of reality upside down, to reorient our compass to point toward the kingdom of heaven rather than toward our selfish desires and fantasies. We are

called to undergo a transformation that transforms our mind, and our sense of reality. As Paul says, "... we have the mind of Christ."¹

To have the "mind of Christ" means we think his thoughts, we react to the world, and to the circumstances that we encounter, the way he would. We are then transformed in our very being into incarnations of Christ in our daily lives and interactions with others. This means we are ready, willing, and able to encounter injustice, irritations, and the challenges of life, and to respond in the way that Christ would respond. The prophecies of Isaiah have been read, studied and interpreted in a great many ways down through the centuries even before the time of Christ. Most of those interpretations do not align with the perspective presented in the Gospel of Mark. Our efforts in this study have been to explore, examine, and challenge our perceptions of the words of Isaiah and the worldview that is created by our understandings of his words as they come to us in Mark's Gospel. This is important because it

¹ 1 Corinthians 2:16 - νοῦν Χριστοῦ ἔχομεν. "In some languages there is no noun such as the English *mind*, and therefore one must use a verb expression meaning 'to think,' 'to reason,' or 'to understand,' depending upon the particular context. In some languages the closest equivalent of 'mind' may be a figurative extension of a term meaning 'head,' but more often than not, thinking is regarded as being in some other part of the body, for example, 'heart' or 'liver.'" Johannes P. Louw & Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Vol. 1, Second ed. (New York NY: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989), 26.14; p. 324.

determines how we live, breathe, and react to life on a day to day basis. All of this being said, let us proceed with Mark chapter 13.

To a large extent the focus in this chapter is on the Temple. This continues the teaching of Jesus and the debates of Jesus in the Temple, which were so prominent in chapters 11 and 12. There is tremendous debate and controversy today over the meaning of Jesus cleansing the Temple. As a sign of the “true meaning” of the cleansing of the Temple, Mark has sandwiched his record of this event between the cursing of the fig tree and the discovery of the withered tree (11:12-14, 20-21). The Temple and the fig tree are thus connected. The teaching of Jesus in the Temple ends with him denouncing the scribes for devouring widow’s houses (12:38-40) and his observation of the widow putting all that she had into the Temple collection (12:41-44). Building upon the prophetic condemnation of the Temple in the preceding chapters, Mark 13 warns of the deceptions that will accompany not only the destruction of the Temple, but also the City of Jerusalem itself.²

² R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2007), p. 443.

As we proceed it is important to recognize that Mark 13 is one of the most hotly debated chapters in the New Testament. Virtually every aspect of this chapter is troubling to interpreters. The discourse in this chapter is “eschatological” in the sense that it deals with the “end times.” It is “apocalyptic” in that it reveals things that cannot be known through natural investigation, or knowledge. It contains information that can only be known because it is revealed from a heavenly source. The intent of this section, though uses that heavenly knowledge to be in a sense “anti-apocalyptic.” This intent comes in the way that this heavenly knowledge warns the readers to beware of those who claim that the events that are about to come mean more than they actually do. Some will claim that this, or that, event represents a sure sign that the end has come and will challenge people in ways that are both ungodly and unwarranted. The warning, in this section, is that many “false-prophets” will come claiming more knowledge than they actually have. Interlaced in all of the predictions of this chapter are continual warnings to avoid being led astray, to stay the course, and to recognize that they (the true followers) do not stand alone. The tone of this chapter is urgent; the

intent of this chapter is to safeguard and to encourage.³ People are in danger and Mark intends to help them by bringing them the words of Jesus.

Jesus has been in the Temple since 11:27, but he now leaves the Temple and predicts its destruction. Not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down, he proclaims. What Jesus had implicitly stated in 11:15-17 here becomes explicit. The first 2 verses of chapter 13 close the section of Jesus teaching in the Temple itself and then at verse 3 he begins to teach opposite the Temple on the Mount of Olives.⁴ The disciples, like most people who choose to follow Jesus are curious as to what to expect in the future. This is the question at verse 4, but the first thing Jesus does is not to tell them what they perhaps expected. He first warns them to “beware” that no one might lead them astray. He warns them that there will be many who will come claiming to speak in his name and some will even claim to be him, and through these deceptions many will be led astray. He tells them many troubling things will come such as wars, rumors of wars, nations rising up against nation, earthquakes and

³ R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, pp. 443-444.

⁴ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2000), p. 135.

famines. He tells them to know these signs as nothing more than the beginning of birthpangs. The birth (the end) is not yet here.

Jesus sets his teaching in the context of the disciples awe at beholding the grandeur of the Temple. Even today, in its ruined state, the Western Wall of the Temple is still very impressive with stones weighing in excess of fifty tons, with one being more than 40 feet long and weighing more than three hundred tons. The walls around the temple towered more than eighty feet above the roadways below; to the south, at its highest point, one of the walls reached more than one-hundred and seventy-five feet above the bedrock. The reaction of the disciples to Jesus predictions of the destruction of this great edifice are natural. Depending upon whether, or not one considers the retaining walls as part of the Temple, this dictates whether a person believes these words have already been fulfilled, or are yet to be fulfilled. Almost all accept that these words were fulfilled in 70 A.D. with the destruction of the Temple and its sacrificial system. In rabbinic circles, the complete demolition of the second temple, down to its foundations became a

proverbial saying.⁵ They believe that the Temple has already been completely destroyed.

Jesus having bested the chief priests, scribes and elders in argument in the Temple he now leaves the Temple never to return (13:1a). The departure is likely intended to be seen as a form of judgment against the Temple in some way similar to the Old Testament examples of abandonment by God of the Temple (Ezekiel 10:18-19⁶). There was, in the writings of Josephus, the record of a voice proclaiming that they were leaving the Temple in about 70 A.D. (Josephus, *Wars* 6:300⁷).⁸ The warnings of Jesus to his disciples are not meant to give them an exact date for when these things would happen, but these signs are meant to warn the faithful to expect catastrophe and not to have their faith tested by these events, but for

⁵ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, in the Anchor Yale Bible series, Vol. 27A (New Haven CT: The Anchor Yale Bible, 2009), pp. 864-870.

⁶ **18 Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house and stopped above the cherubim. 19 The cherubim lifted up their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight as they went out with the wheels beside them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.** NRSV.

⁷ "Moreover, at the feast which is called Pentecost, the priests on entering the inner court of the temple by night, as their custom was in the discharge of their ministrations, reported that they were conscious, first of a commotion and a din, and after that of a voice as of a host, "We are departing hence." H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus The Jewish War Books V-VII* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 265.

⁸ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, pp. 864-871.

them to be strengthened by them.⁹ Verse 13 of this chapter surely sums up the central motivation for the words that Jesus gives here, “the one who endures to the end will be saved.” The motivation for what Jesus says here is to encourage endurance, because in the end, that is what is necessary for salvation.

Indeed many False Messiahs would come such as Judas, son of the “brigand-chief” Hezekiah (Acts 5:37; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.271-272; *Jewish Wars*, 2.56), Simeon of Perea, who placed the crown on his own head (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.273-276; *Jewish Wars* 2.57-2.59), Anthronges the Shepherd of Judea, who was remarkable for his stature and his great strength (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.278-284; *Jewish Wars* 2.60-65), Theudas, who stated that he was a prophet (Acts 5:36; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.97-98), an Egyptian false-prophet who collected a following of around thirty thousand people and led them to the Mount of Olives in order to attack Jerusalem (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.169-170; *Jewish Wars* 2.261-263), Menahem the son of Judas of Galilee who plundered Herod’s armory

⁹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, pp. 447-448.

at Masada and returned to Jerusalem like a king and became the leader of the revolution (Josephus *Jewish Wars* 2.433-448), John of Gischala (Josephus *Jewish Wars*, 4.106-111, 126-128, 208), Simon bar-Giora, by proclaiming freedom for slaves and rewards for the free (Josephus *Jewish Wars* 4.503-544, 556-565).¹⁰

Others would come after these as well with rebellion after rebellion continually testing Rome until at last Rome would inflict a devastating defeat upon those living in Israel. According to Cassius Dio, 580,000 Jews perished in this war in the early part of the second century A.D. and many more died from hunger and disease, while those that survived were sold into slavery. The Emperor Hadrian would wipe the name of Israel from the map and replace it instead with Syria Palaestina (this is the source for the name Palestine, which is based upon the name of the ancient adversary of the Jews, the Philistines). In 138 A. D., the Romans barred Jews from Jerusalem and even the Talmud came to refer to the leader of this final rebellion, “Simeon Bar-Kochba,” as “Ben-Kusiba,” which was a derogatory term that was used to indicate that he was a false

¹⁰ R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, pp. 449-450.

Messiah. The predictions given by Jesus are harsh and indicate the splitting of families, people being put to death, and being hated because of the name of Jesus. So often, especially in our prayers we fail to recognize that the help and assistance that Jesus promises us in situations like this is not to remove us from danger, or even death, but to give us the strength, the courage, and the words to endure it as his faithful witnesses.

At verse 14, we encounter the phrase “the abomination of desolation,” which is a phrase that comes from Daniel (11:31; 12:11; cf. 9:27), where it refers to an idolatrous statue, an abomination that makes the Temple of God desolate by defiling its holy space and causing pious worshippers to avoid it. In the book of Daniel itself, this phrase is a coded reference to Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who erected an image of a pagan deity, the Syrian god Baal Shemayin, on the altar of the Jerusalem Temple in 168 B.C. He would offer swine on the altar of God in the Temple itself. After the Romans became overlords of Judea in 63 B.C., the people of Judea began to reinterpret Daniel’s words as a prophecy of the future desecration of the Temple.¹¹ There

¹¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, pp. 889-890.

are a number of different things that people have interpreted this to refer to specifically; from the Roman Emperor Titus seeing inside the Holy of Holies when it burned, to the marching of Roman troops into the Temple carrying their idolatrous standards, to even the erection of Aelia Capitolina on the site of Jerusalem and on the site of the Temple Mount itself, in 135 A.D. The Emperor Hadrian built a new temple to Jupiter on the site of the ancient Jewish Temple that stood until around 323 A.D. when the Emperor Constantine had it destroyed. The Jews today, along with many Christians, predict the building of a third Jewish Temple on this site that will never be destroyed.

Moving back to the words of Jesus in Mark 13 he seems to be concerned only with telling his followers of the coming of these events for their protection and encouragement. For their protection he tells them to flee and simply to pray that it is not in winter. The suffering in this time will be tremendous and certainly there were predictions of the coming of the Messiah, but Jesus says do not believe it. There is further warning about the coming of false-messiahs and false-prophets. Some of these false prophets and

messiahs will even be able to produce signs and omens. These will be produced in order to lead astray the elect. Jesus indicates that the reason he told them these things is in order that they will be “alert” (βλέπετε).

Beginning at verse 24, we have an allusion (“in those days”) that can be found in a variety of Old Testament verses (Jeremiah 31:29; 33:15-16; Joel 2:29; 3:1; Zechariah 8:23). Such words (“in those days”) were often used to indicate the onset of coming tribulation and surely that is what these words will have brought to the minds of the readers of Mark’s Gospel. In most Bibles 24b-25 are marked out as quotations and if you have notes they will likely let you know that these verses allude to Isaiah 13:10¹² and 34:4.¹³ This is not so much a citation of Scripture as it is a conflation of allusions to Scripture. The allusions refer to the “Day of the Lord.” Though the allusions are not exact citations they are very clear, especially in the case of Isaiah 13:10. These verses also echo phrases that are found in Joel 2:10; 3:4, 15-16 [The Septuagint 4:15-16]. Revelation 6:12-13

¹² **For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.** NRSV.

¹³ **All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree.** NRSV.

uses this same traditional language (“in the day of the Lord”). At the coming of the Lord, the heavens and the earth would shake and the sun and the moon would be darkened and the stars would follow.¹⁴

Mark’s usage of these lines from Isaiah would evoke for his readers memories of the prophetic threat of judgment, this would be especially the case among his Jewish readers, but also among those Gentiles familiar with the Jewish Scriptures.¹⁵ Despite the fact that Jesus here talks to his disciples about the end-time he makes it clear to them that no historical event can be read as a sign of the eschaton (the end) (13:5-23). The point of this section is to make it clear that many will come making messianic claims and perhaps basing them upon events that they say prove their point. They are liars and worse, they are false-messiahs. Even if they perform miracles and make these claims they are false, deceivers. The apocalyptic interpretation of these events is to be ignored by the disciples of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ These are indeed things that must happen before the end, but they are not meant to convey a different action, or attitude

¹⁴ R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, p. 465.

¹⁵ Morna Hooker, “Isaiah in Mark’s Gospel,” in Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken, *Isaiah in the New Testament* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), pp. 35-49.

¹⁶ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, p. 136.

on the part of the Christian. The Christian is called to be steady and consistent throughout, living a life of faithfulness to God in all circumstances. Even when these prophecies are shown to be true they do not call for some different response on our part.

The disciples had asked Jesus for a sign of when the things that he prophesied would come to pass and so he gives them the words of Isaiah the prophet and then at verse 26 proclaims to them that they will see “the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.” The words of the prophecy are meant to provide comfort and assurance that they are indeed on the right path. So often we as human beings can be tempted by what is new as if it is just now revealed. I think Jesus here uses Isaiah to provide comfort in the steadiness, the deliberation, of God. He is following a plan to save his people and he has not departed from it and he revealed it for those who would choose to look long long ago. The ministry of Jesus is set within these ancient words and among the ideas that God had proclaimed through these prophets hundreds of years before the coming of Christ. In these prophecies we are grounded in the faithfulness of God. If we will trust him and remain faithful to him we

will be gathered from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

Jesus here couches his mission on earth in terms of the words of Isaiah. His ministry is the fulfillment of these words time and time again. Just as the seed of Adam had been scattered over the face of the earth, so would they be gathered when Christ returns, from the whole of creation. In Mark 13:28-31, Jesus wants it to be clear to his disciples that the things he spoke of would indeed take place and they are certain to happen. Then beginning at verse 32 Jesus anticipates our question and answers it, “when?” In so many ways this section seems to me to be one of the most neglected and forgotten in all of Scripture. Continually I see and hear people talking about this sign, or that sign, being a sure indication that Christ will return soon. I guess it is part of human nature, but Jesus says that no one knows the day, or the hour, when Christ will return, not even Christ himself. Only the Father knows and he is not telling even Jesus.

Jesus clearly knows human nature would be to wait until the last minute and then change, but the call of this section of Scripture


is for perpetual and continual vigilance. We are to “Keep Awake.”

This is the message of Jesus and this was the message of Isaiah the prophet too. The time will come, but no one knows when and so the only sure thing is to be continually ready. Are you ready?

Synopsis

As we begin this section it is of crucial importance for us to remember our purpose in this study. It is not an intellectual exercise, or simply a quest for knowledge. Our goal is to gain an understanding of the nature of God as seen through the words of Mark's Gospel and Mark expressed that the "good news" that he proclaims is that which was prophesied by Isaiah the prophet. As we understand how Mark interpreted these ancient prophecies we can be impacted by the planning, forethought, and power of God to bring about the fulfillment of these words delivered hundreds of years earlier. This should build our faith in God and help us to understand more fully his true nature.

In this particular section of Mark, we come to the end of Jesus ministering in the Temple of Jerusalem and his predictions of its destruction based upon the fact that it is not fulfilling the purpose God intended for it. The Temple was an impressive human structure, but God was about to accomplish something far beyond what could be done with stone, he was about to build his living Temple and so he



prophesies the destruction of the earthly Jewish Temple. He warns his disciples that this is going to happen and also warns them that many false prophets, and false messiahs will come claiming that the end has come and some will even perform great signs to substantiate their claims, but Jesus tells them to endure through all that comes. He promises them that if they will do this they will be saved in the end. They will see many discouraging and disheartening signs, but they are called to endure and persevere and at one point they will even have to flee Judea because of what will happen. The suffering will be such as has not been seen before and more than it will ever be, but he says in these days continue to be alert.

There will be no mistaking the coming of Jesus. He will come in the clouds and he will gather his elect from the four winds and to the ends of heaven. He makes it absolutely crystal clear that no can predict when this will be and he calls for them to keep alert. These words are given to encourage perseverance in all circumstances and especially in suffering. These are words of warning to keep the elect from being led astray. The call to be alert is the central message of this chapter.

Questions

1. Why are we studying Mark through the lens of Isaiah? How can this help us today?
2. What was the purpose of the Jewish Temple?
3. What lessons do you think we should learn about God by the destruction of the Temple?
4. Why do you think the destruction of the Temple happened?
5. What are some ways that we as Christians can be led astray?
6. What are some ways that we can avoid being led astray?
7. Why are people so interested in signs?
8. Why do you think God allows those that follow him to be handed over to authorities and to be beaten and even killed?
9. What do you think we should learn about God from his willingness to allow his followers to die for him?
10. What does God promise to those who endure to the end?
11. Why do you think false prophets and false messiahs seek to lead people astray?

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12. Why do you think only the Father knows when the end will come?
 13. What might we do if we knew exactly when the end was to be?
 14. What does it mean for us as Christians to “keep alert?”
 15. What is the most important message that you believe God has for us in this chapter?