

Jesus' Last Week: Signs of the End

Wars and rumors of war, airplanes that disappear, pandemics and natural disasters: are you ready in case this is the end of the world? If not, a company named Vivos is anxious to help. For a mere \$35,000 per person, you can reserve a bed for yourself and your family in an underground Vivos shelter. Their website says:

“Our (shelters) comfortably accommodate community groups from 50 to 1,000 people, in spacious quarters, outfitted and stocked for a minimum of 1 year of autonomous survival to ride out the potential events. Every detail has been considered and planned for. Members need only to arrive before their facility is locked down and secured from the chaos above.”ⁱ

But if you go to their website, you'll see that each underground facility has a giant pipe sticking out of the ground to bring air into the facility. How secure is that air duct from the “chaos above”? Maybe you should consider another form of shelter from the chaos.

In our passage today, Jesus offers an alternative to Vivos. This passage is known as the Olivet Discourse. It's called that because Jesus delivered this message on the Mount of Olives on Tuesday of His Passion week. It's probably the most debated sermon He ever gave because of the possibility of various interpretations regarding the prophecies He pronounced. Today, my goal is not to try to untangle all the details of this sermon. It IS my goal for us to see the main points of His teaching. So, let's begin with the...

I. Basic Definitions of Terms that Jesus Uses

Mark records that Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Jesus two questions:

Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled? (Mark 13: 4)

Those seem like simple enough questions, right? However, they're built on some foundational truths that we need in order to understand Jesus' answers. Now, before I unpack some of these terms, let me just say that there are godly men and women who disagree with my definitions. When we talk about eschatology, which means “a study of the end times,” we're not talking about salvation issues. Whether you are saved or not is based on one thing: “Have you trusted in Christ's work on the cross to pay the debt of your sin?” What you believe about how the world ends does NOT determine whether or not your sins are forgiven and you get to go to heaven.

Okay, so let's begin with the definition of the Biblical Timeline of History. Again, different Christian camps use different schemes to chart a Biblical Timeline. Mine reflects what I believe Jesus teaches. There are five periods:

- 1- Creation to 2000 BC: The Time of Creation and Early Peoples
- 2- 2000 BC to 600 BC: The Time of Abraham and Israel
- 3- 600 BC to the Rapture of the Church: Time of the Gentiles
 - Resurrection of Christ to Rapture: Church Age
- 4- Rapture to Second Coming of Christ: 7-Year Great Tribulation

5- Second Coming of Christ to New Heaven, New Earth (Millennium)

Specific to Mark 13 are the events that are bounded by the end of the Church Age and the beginning of the Millennium. Look at this chart:

[Show the "Olivet Discourse" chart]

So, this is where it gets tricky and somewhat confusing. Here's the key question: When Jesus speaks of the "end," or as Jesus says in Matthew, "the close of the age," which "end" or which "age" is Jesus referring to? Is He talking about:

- The end of Jerusalem as the spiritual center of Judaism? Or,
- The end of the Church Age? Or,
- The end of the Age of the Gentiles? Or,
- The end of the physical earth as we know it?

Which one? Which "end" is Jesus talking about? And the answer is: YES!!!

Yes, He's speaking about all those "ends." He says they are going to happen at different times and in different ways. Now, do you see why there's so much disagreement among Christian scholars about this passage?

So, very briefly now, I'm going to show you where in this discourse Jesus is referring to each of these "ends," or "closings of an age."

First, He's speaking of the end of Jerusalem as the spiritual center of Judaism in verses 1 and 2: (Mark 13:1-2)

As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

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

With the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD, this prophecy was fulfilled. In fact, some of the other signs Jesus mentions here also took place in 70 AD, like people fleeing to the mountains. The Temple, by the way, has never been rebuilt. In fact today, the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim holy site, sits squarely where the Temple once sat.

Now, how do we know that ALL the signs of the end that Jesus gives here don't relate ONLY to the end of Jerusalem as the spiritual center of Judaism? Because some of them didn't happen in 70 AD! Those were difficult days for Christians and Jews but they weren't "*...days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world...*" (verse 19). Nor was the gospel "*...first preached to all nations*" (verse 10) nor was Jesus seen "*...coming in clouds with great power and glory...*" and sending his angels to "*...gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*" (verses 26-27) Those things didn't happen in 70 AD!!

[Put "Olivet Discourse" chart back up]

So, what does that mean? It can only mean one thing: some of these "*signs of the end*" must refer to another type of "end." Which ones? Most of them refer to the End of the Age of the Gentiles which comes right before Jesus' coming "*...with great power and glory.*" (v. 26) This means that most of these signs will be fulfilled during the Great Tribulation, that seven-year period which happens after the Church Age ends. Here are some of the verses that refer to the Tribulation period:

v. 9 "You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged..."

v. 11 You will be "...arrested and brought to trial..."

v. 12 "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child."

v. 13 “All men will hate you because of me...”

v. 20 “...the Lord ...cut short those days... for the sake of the elect...”

And the classic sign of the end of the Tribulation is also a sign of the end of the Age of the Gentiles and is found in verses 26 and 27:

At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

This is, obviously, a one-time event. It didn't happen in 70 AD but it will happen one day.

Now, there's one more “end” to discuss: the end of the Church Age. This is perhaps the most controversial of all of the “ends” that Jesus spoke of that day. Many Christians today believe this is the same as the end of the Age of the Gentiles. I don't believe that. Why not? Because verses 26 and 27 simply can't be made to mesh with other things that Jesus said in this same sermon.

Matthew 24 is another version of this Olivet Discourse. There, Matthew remembers Jesus' talking about two distinctly different times and forms of coming. He mentions almost word for word what Mark wrote about Jesus' coming when “...all the nations... will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.” (Matt. 24:30) But, Matthew also remembers Jesus' speaking of another coming, a kind of “sneak attack.” Listen: (Matt. 24:39-41, 43-44)

That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

So, how can Jesus come with “great power and glory,” such that “all nations” will see Him, but also at the same event come like a thief in the night? I think it's clear that He can't. When Jesus speaks of coming like a thief, He's describing what Paul calls being “caught up” to meet Christ in the air, which happens before the Tribulation period begins. It marks the end of the Church Age.

Okay, so if this is the first time you've ever been taken through this chapter in the Gospels, your head is probably swimming and you're thinking, “Wait! What? Can you go over all that again?” I understand. But actually, no, I can't go over it all again but I HAVE put a couple of resources in the worship folder for you to read if you're interested. ⁱⁱ The bottom line of what Jesus is saying here is found in verses 28 to 31 which we need to look at next. It is...

II. The Lesson of the Fig Tree

In both Matthew and Mark, we find this summation by Jesus. He says:

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (Mark 13:28-31)

As I said earlier, most of these “signs,” are for the benefit of people who will become Christians during the Tribulation period. You see, if you’re a Christian today, you won’t be here. Paul, who was given special insight about these things when he was taken up to heaven, says in I Thess. 5:9:

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus said that some of these signs are simply early warnings of what’s to come, like the “...beginning of birth pains.” (Mk. 13:8) Now, in His summation, He refers to them as being like the leaves of the fig tree. What’s significant about this is that the fig tree is basically the last tree to leaf out in the spring. So, when it does, it’s the last sign of summer coming. Jesus says that some of these signs are like that for us who are living before the rapture. In verses 5 through 8 He says:

...Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, “I am he,” and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. (Mk. 13:5-8)

Of course, there have been spiritual deceivers before in history, as there have been wars and rumors of wars. But are things actually getting worse or are they just reported more? According to MunichRe, the world’s largest reinsurer, North America has seen a five-fold increase in natural disasters since 1980. And this figure does not include Hurricane Sandy. MunichRe writes, “Nowhere in the world is the rising number of natural catastrophes more evident than in North America.” But this rise in natural disasters IS a worldwide phenomenon with a fourfold increase in Asia and a doubling in Europe. ⁱⁱⁱ

So, what’s Jesus’ point? He’s asking if you’re paying attention to the fig tree:

...when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. (Mk. 13:29-30)

But what’s His motive? Is He trying to control us by fear? No, think about it: if you’re a parent, what things do you consider important to tell your kids and what things are optional? It’s probably optional whether or not you tell them about the time you got sick on the field trip in third grade and it’s probably optional whether or not you tell them about the boyfriend you had before you met their father. But telling them about the danger of poison, that isn’t optional. Telling them about the danger of walking on ice in March - not optional. Telling them about the danger of getting into a stranger’s car is definitely not optional. Why do we talk to our kids about such negative things? Because we love them dearly and don’t want evil to come anywhere near them!!

Why does Jesus give us these negative warnings? Because He loves us dearly and doesn’t want evil to come anywhere near us. Have you heard Him today? Are you safe from these dangers? You can be. Where’s the best place of safety for your child? Right next to you, right? What’s the safest place for you from the danger of the ‘End of the Age’? Right next to Christ! John 1:14 calls Jesus the “only begotten from the Father.”(NASB) Speaking of Jesus and the believer, I John 5:18 then says:

...He who was begotten of God [Jesus] keeps him and the evil one does not touch him. (1 John 5:18 NASB)

Have you put yourself in THAT place of safety? There's only one way to get there. You have to ask Jesus to forgive your sin which then causes His death on the cross to pay for the debt of your sins. If you ask, He will do it. Have you asked?

Secondly, if you believe, as I do, that we are the last generation before the end of the Church Age, are you spending your time, your money, your giftedness in a way that reflects that belief? If Jesus came back this week, some people you know will go to hell and the Bible makes it clear that, once you're in hell, there's no way out. It was interesting to me in the video at the beginning, that when people were asked what they would do with more time if they had it, no one said anything about telling more people about Jesus. No one said anything about making sure that someone they loved had one more chance to receive the grace and mercy of God. **If you had more time, how would you use it?**

Charles Thomas Studd was a great college athlete in England. (Isn't that an awesome name for a male athlete?) He was also an heir to great wealth. He became a follower of Jesus Christ in prep school, but the lure of athletic fame and the lure of using his family's great riches drew him away from serving Christ. But while he was captain of the cricket team at Cambridge, he had a change of heart. He wrote a poem that reflected his return to Christ. Part of that poem goes like this:

*Two little lines I heard one day,
Traveling along life's busy way;
Bringing conviction to my heart,
And from my mind would not depart;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last...*

*Only one life, yes only one,
Soon will its fleeting hours be done;
Then, in 'that day' my Lord to meet,
And stand before His Judgment seat;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

C. T., as he was called, decided to make his life count by going to the mission field. He served in China with Hudson Taylor, then India and central Africa. Eventually, he established a missionary-sending agency that sent men and women around the world. Of his calling, C. T. said, "Some want to live within sound of the church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell."

If the end of the world is near, how should we spend our time - digging a deep hole and hiding, or telling all who will hear about the grace and mercy of God? I know what C. T. Studd would say. His poem concludes:

*Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.
And when I'm dying, how happy I'll be,
If the lamp of my life has been burned out for Thee.*

Let's pray...

ⁱ Vivos website

ⁱⁱ Charles Swindoll, *Daniel Vol. 2: God's Plan for the Future*; John Walvoord, *EndTimes: Understanding Today's World Events in Biblical Prophecy*; Tim LaHaye, *Understanding Bible Prophecy for Yourself*

ⁱⁱⁱ "North America Has Biggest Rise in Weather Catastrophes," Bloomberg.net